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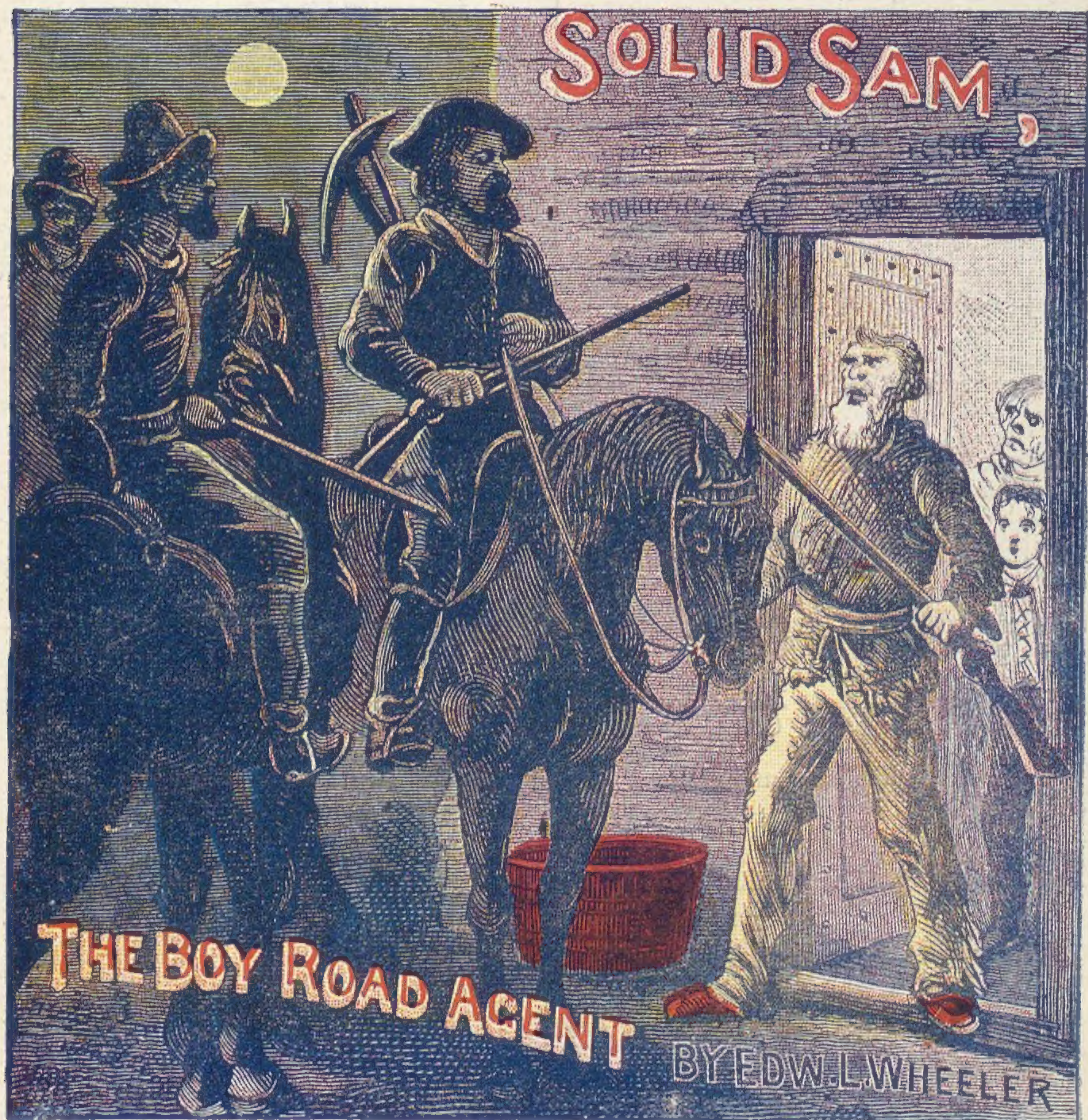
No. 32.

Issued Weekly.
Oct. 18, 1899.

M. J. IVERS & CO., Publishers,
(James Sullivan, Proprietor.)
379 Pearl Street, New York.

Price 5 Cents.
\$2.50 a Year.

Vol. III.



"WELL! WELL!" THE OLD MAN DEMANDED, AS HE SURVEYED THE LINE OF HORSEMEN, WITH EVIDENT DISPLEASURE. "WHAT BRINGS YOU UPON THE LAND OF WHITE BEARD?"

EDWARD L. WHEELER'S

DEADWOOD DICK, JR., NOVELS

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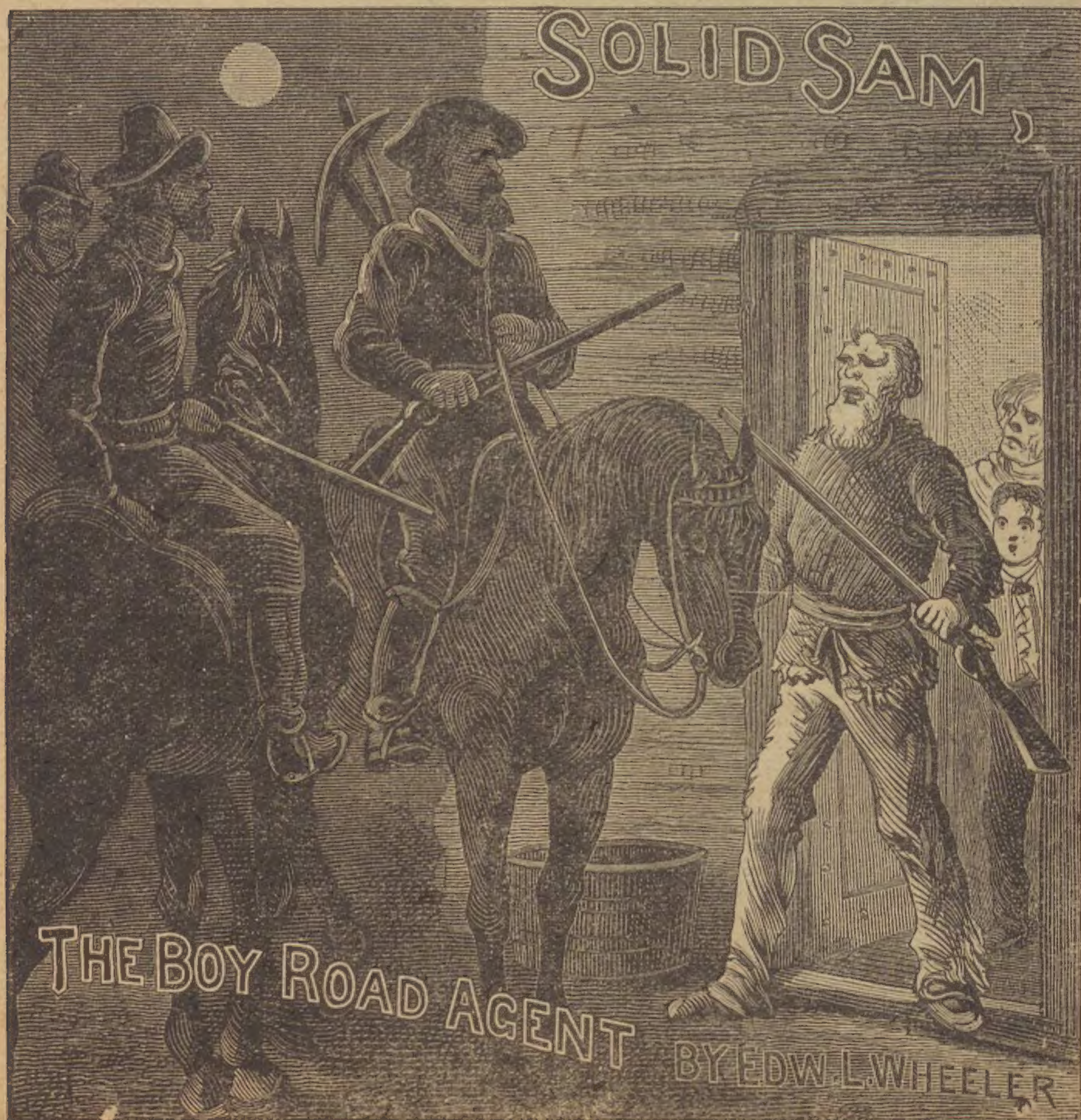
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"WELL! WELL!" THE OLD MAN DEMANDED, AS HE SURVEYED THE LINE OF HORSEMEN, WITH EVIDENT DISPLEASURE, "WHAT BRINGS YOU UPON THE LAND OF WHITE BEARD?"

Solid Sam, The Boy Road-Agent;

OR,

THE BRANDED BROWS.

A TALE OF WILD WYOMING.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

THE time was in the spring of the year—an eventful one, too, for all winter long the mountains and prairies had been wrapped in deep, silent sheets of pure white snow, now to be melted by an incessant three days' rain, until the dun of the prairies and the gray of the mountains were exposed to the sight.

The result of the precipitate rain and thaw had been to fill the streams to overflowing, and strike terror to the hearts of the squatters along their courses, for many a cabin or shanty was swept away by the stubborn and resistless element. For miles and miles the Missouri of the North, the Yellowstone and both branches of the Platte were more than bank full, and raging and rampaging as only a thoroughbred freshet can, while the lesser streams were proportionately high and dangerous.

'Way up along the Yellowstone stood a little squatters' town upon the immediate banks of the river, where dwelt trappers, hunters and settlers to the number of some two-score.

One day during the hight of the flood, a "prairie schooner" came across the northern plains and entered the settlement, and the occupants, a couple of ruffianly-looking fellows, engaged accommodations at the little tavern.

They claimed to be trappers going south of the Yellowstone, and would have to wait until the flood abated ere they could ford that now turbulent stream. But little attention was paid to them, and they wandered about the settlement during the day.

About midnight, following the day, they had stealthily left the settlement behind, and in their "schooner," drawn by a spanking pair of horses, were making rapid time in a southerly direction, following the course of the noisy and turbulent Yellowstone.

The sky was clear, and the moon looked down upon the prairie with spectral effect.

At last, when several miles from the settlement, the wagon came to a halt upon the bank of the river.

A raft lay partly launched, near by—being several logs fastened together with lariats, and also secured to a stake upon the shore. This raft had been some distance from the water, originally, but the flood had gradually crept up until the rude craft was nearly afloat.

The two men disembarked from the vehicle, and going to the rear end, opened a gap in the

canvas, and hauled forth, first a woman, young and pretty, and then two children, a boy and girl, in the neighborhood of six years of age, and apparently twins.

Both the woman and the children had their arms secured behind their backs, and terrified expressions upon their faces told but too plainly that they feared the ruffianly pair, in whose power they were.

"In the name of Heaven, sir, I pray you to tell me what you intend to do with me and my children?" the mother cried, as the larger and fiercer of the two ruffians placed her upon her feet. "What evil motive prompted you to snatch me from my home at the settlement, and bring me hither?"

"Waal, mum, we had orders ter do it, ye see, an' we allus obey orders," the giant replied.

"Orders!" the young mother cried, in consternation—"orders? By whom did you receive orders to bring me here, pray?"

The two men exchanged glances, after which the larger one replied.

"I dunno's thar's enny harm in tellin' ye, mum, sence ye ain't got long to live. We aire respectively Black Eph and Bosting Bill, practical cut-throats, an' sech like, an' we war hired ter do ther job by your own affectionate husband, whom we met up in the mines. Et appears thet he left ye ter seek his fortune, an' hevin' struck it rich, an' found anuther damsel he likes better'n you, he has a desire ter git rid of you. So he hires me an' Bosting Bill ter put ye aboard a ragin' raft on ther ragin' Yellowstone, an' let ye go, trustin' ter luck thet ye never turn up ag'in, ter bother him!"

During this rude recital the woman had stood in the grasp of the ruffian's powerful hand, whiter than the blocks of ice rushing by upon the surface of the angry stream.

Evident it was that the revelation of the ruffian came to her with stunning effect.

"My God! this cannot be true," she gasped, trembling from head to foot. "You are lying to me—Guy Hathaway would never be guilty of such an infamous scheme!"

"Thet's jest where ye make a mistake, mum," Black Eph replied, confidently. "Ye tho't ye know'd yer man, but got fooled. We war hired ter set ye adrift, by Guy Hathaway, and no one else."

"But you will not do it—oh! you will not do such a terrible wrong, I know!" the wronged wife pleaded, piteously. "For the love of God, spare me from this horrible fate, and I will give you all I have in the wide world—all—everything!"

"Humph! how much swag ye got?" Black Eph demanded, a cunning glitter in his terrible eyes. "Ef ye can go above ther gineral's pile, mebbe we're ter be bought. We allus work fer ther party w'ot pays best."

"I have but a hundred dollars in the wide world, but oh! I will cheerfully give it to you, if you will but spare me and my children!"

"Sorry, mum, but ther gineral goes ye nine hundred better'n that, an' considerin' thet a thousand ain't picked up every day, ther gineral gits our vote, you bet!"

"Then you will not spare me?—you will force a poor defenseless mother with her children to

court death upon that awful sheet of water?" Mrs. Hathaway demanded, wildly.

"Sorry mum, but thet's ther orders, an' we allus obey orders. So ye'll hev ter take a ride on ther raft, an' as et's moonshiny, et ain't a-goin' ter be so bad, arter all. Bosting, bind ther kids' feet, an' I'll secure the leddy's."

"Villain! monster!" Mrs. Hathaway cried, scornfully. "I defy you to do your worst, for your accursed master. I am not a coward, and I will face my fate, trusting in the One who never deserts his children—God!"

"That's bizness!" Black Eph commented, coolly, as he secured her feet. "Ye hev got good grit, an' I admire ye fer it, I do. Shell I lash ther young kids to ye?"

"Yes! yes! it was kind of you to think of it. I want them by my side."

The little boy and girl, both pretty children, were accordingly bound to the mother with lariets in such a way that they could not be washed overboard unless she was, too. Both were speechless with affright, but pluckily kept from crying.

The trio were now placed upon the raft, and Boston Bill undid the fastenings which held it to the shore.

The moment it was freed from the land, the heavy float swept out into the roaring, moonlit stream, with Mrs. Hathaway crouching upon it, and her two children lashed to her sides; and away they were borne by the rushing waters, at a frightful velocity, soon passing from view of the two ruffians upon the shore.

We shall not attempt to picture the feelings of the horrified mother, as she was borne onward by the unconquerable freshet.

With wild eyes, and deathly face, she kept in the center of the raft, speechless with the horror of her perilous situation.

For hours the raft rushed on, threatening every minute to go to pieces, in the surface of crushing ice, water and floodwood, while the roar of the turbulent river was deafening.

In silent prayer the mother was swept on, the children now sobbing with terror.

"Mamma, where we doin'?" the boy demanded, between his sobs. "Nellie an' I so 'fraid, mamma!"

"Sh! dear!" was the faint reply of the mother, meant to be cheerful. "We are going down the river—to Our Father!"

"Oh! oh!" the little fellow exclaimed, joyfully. "Cheer up, Sis, we see papa, byme-by, maybe!"

Maybe!

How that single word chilled the heart of Mrs. Hathaway, and caused a blinding rush of tears to dim her eyes. She felt that her innocent children would never live to see the realization of that hopeful "maybe."

The river seemed now to run faster and faster, and the raft kept pace. The velocity at which it was borne on was truly alarming. This fact was intensified when Mrs. Hathaway made the discovery that they were approaching a rapids.

Ahead loomed up a rocky point, against and partially over which the waters tumbled with a sullen roar.

Down upon this bar the raft was dashed, and

the occupants hurled high and dry upon the sandy shore, while with a groaning sound the clumsy craft went to pieces, and its timbers were washed away with the flood.

On the following forenoon the flood had abated considerably, and the river had shrunk to its usual proportions, when a horseman came from over the eastern plain and halted upon the shore of the Yellowstone, just opposite the bar that stretched its peninsular neck out into the stream, and against which the raft had been wrecked the night before.

A dashing young fellow of eighteen years, handsome of face and form, was the horseman, and his garb of buckskin and well-selected weapons betokened him a hunter.

"Ugh! Prince, the river is rather a cool bath, isn't it?" he murmured, as he patted his horse upon the neck; "nevertheless, we shall have to cross it in order to reach our destination. The flood has gone down, and I reckon this is about the shallowest ford we are likely to find; so, go ahead, old boy, and see if we cannot make the bar, yonder."

The current was still swift, but seeming to understand the words of the young hunter, the horse plunged into the stream and swam it resolutely, until he finally emerged upon the bar.

Scarcely had the young horseman gained the bar ere he discovered the bodies of the previous night's wreck, lying where they had been cast, in an insensible condition. Hastily dismounting, he approached them, and made an examination.

"A mother and her children, evidently," he muttered, sadly. "But, how came they bound in this shape? Some band of red-skins must have left them here to be washed away. Ha! the little girl's heart still beats! The others are dead."

With his knife he severed the lariat that bound the trio together, and raised the little girl from the ground. There was no mistaking that her heart still beat, although she was yet insensible.

"Poor little waif," the young hunter murmured, tenderly laying her upon a blanket. "I have found her, and I would be a brute to leave her here to die. No; I will take her with me, and care for her. But first, I must be sure that the others are dead."

A closer examination failed to discover any sign of life in the mother or the boy, and having no implements the hunter was forced to leave them lying there unburied, while, with the little girl in his arms, he mounted his horse, and galloped away to the southwestward.

Not over two hours after the departure of the hunter, a second horseman forded the Yellowstone to the peninsula, and discovered the bodies, with considerable surprise.

He was a large-framed man, clad throughout in buffalo-skin, with the furry side out, and in face looked to be about fifty years of age. His hair and huge beard of great length, however, were as white as snow, and there was a dull, sorrowful expression to his eyes, that told of some great sorrow which had wrecked his mind, and caused it at times to wander. He was well-

armed with rifle, pistols and knife, and the horse he bestrode was no common brute.

Immediately upon discovering the bodies, he drew rein, dismounted and approached them.

A strange cry escaped him as he bent over the woman—a cry of anguish and remorse.

"Bethel! Bethel! Oh! my God have mercy!" he moaned, bowing his head upon the cold inanimate form, and sobbing convulsively. "Dead—my child, dead, and here in this wild spot? Ah! by Heaven! she has been bound, but her bonds have been severed by a keen-edged blade."

The White Beard had now leaped to his feet with a terrible expression of rage in his eyes.

"I see! I see!" he hissed, his hands clinched, and muscles standing out in bold relief. "Foul work has been done here, and I know at whose door to lay the crime of murder. Bethel, my child, hear me swear in the presence of God, that your wrongs shall be avenged. Ah!"

The old man started, for he saw the limbs of the boy stir. A hasty examination revealed that he was alive, but insensible.

A gleam of joy flushed over the old man's face at this discovery, as if he had already planned some future course of action.

Carrying the body of poor Mrs. Hathaway into a natural niche in a huge mass of rocks near by, he left it there, and rolled a bowlder before the entrance. Then returning to the boy, he raised him tenderly in his arms, and vaulted into the saddle as spryly as any younger person could have done.

The next instant he dashed away, in nearly the same course taken by the younger scout but a few hours ahead of him.

Just six years afterward.

The night again was moonlight, and a balmy one in early springtime, with an earthly smell that had only come since the snow had gone.

Down a sort of a dug-way trail, or wagon road, that descended from a mountain of the southern Wind River Range, into a deep canyon below, rode, in double file, a body of horsemen, some sixty or more, in number, well mounted and armed, but roughly dressed and bewhiskered, to a man.

And the fact that they carried, attached to their saddles and horses, implements commonly used by miners and some of the paraphernalia of camping-life, indicated the fact that they were what is known in all the gold-mining districts as "stampedeers."

Dissatisfied with the remuneration of one mining locality, this class of characters, invariably made up of adventurers, ruffians and hard citizens, make no bones, literally, of depopulating their former "city," and stampeding to some other and "fatter" streak they have heard of, and if they chance to be strongest in numbers, woe be to the citizens of the place invaded, as they have the choice of only two things, either to "bounce," or fight.

This party of horsemen was such a gang, which had stampeded from the quartz mines of the Sweetwater Mountains—men who recked little the value of life, and feared neither man or death.

Down the moonlit road they guided their horses, preserving a grim silence, as the moonlight dwelt upon their ranks with picturesque effect.

Below, in the depths of the deep black canyon, a single starlike gleam of light located some human habitation, and the stampedeers, as if by universal consent, gave vent to a grunt of recognition as they saw it.

Half an hour of descent by the tortuous dug-way brought them to the canyon bottom, which was several acres wide, and of a sandy and rocky nature, and also watered by a small creek, which, though narrow, was very deep. On reaching the bottom, the stampedeers turned and rode in the same direction they had come, only along through the canyon, until they came to where there stood a large two-story log cabin, from one of the windows of which there streamed a light.

Up to the cabin door they rode, and then came to a halt, the leader rapping smartly upon the door with the butt of his rifle.

The door was opened after a few minutes by an old man with a sweeping white beard. He was dressed throughout in untanned buffalo-skin, and, as he made his appearance, clutched a heavy rifle in his grasp.

Following him to the open doorway, came an old wrinkled and toothless hag of the most hideous aspect, and a bright young lad of twelve years, whose features and form were markedly handsome, inasmuch as he bore no trace of resemblance to the strange pair with whom he kept company.

"Well! well!" the old man demanded, querulously, as he surveyed the line of horsemen with evident displeasure, "what brings you upon the land of White Beard?"

"Waal, old man, we've cum hyar ter take persession uv ther placer mines ye've bin workin' so long on ther sly!" one of the stampedeers announced grimly. "You an' yer old woman hev played yer witch game about as long as et'll work, an' now we're goin' ter see ef thar's any gold in Buckskin Canyon, or not. So pack up yer duds, an' prepare ter skin out ter onc't!"

"No! no! you shall not drive me from my possessions!" the White Beard cried, fiercely and resolutely.

"I came here first, ere other foot of mortal man had ever trodden here, and staked off this gulch, an' et's mine, as it is Government land, and I have tenanted it longer than the time exacted."

"Ken't help thet, old boss!" the spokesman of the stampedeers exclaimed, roughly. "Ye've either got to vamoose, or we'll plant ye right heer in under ther shadder of your cabin, you bet!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the stampedeers, to a man. "Bounce out, old White Whiskers, or we'll plant ye, immegetly."

"I will not leave my rightful possessions without a struggle!" the hermit cried, sternly, and raising his rifle with amazing quickness, he fired.

There came a cry from the spokesman of the party, and he dropped from his saddle.

Then, before the White Beard could slam shut the door, there was a rifle report, and he

clasped his hands to his heart, with a groan—staggered back, and fell into the arms of the youth!

With a scream of rage the old hag snatched a pair of revolvers from his belt, and turning, opened a deadly fire upon the stampede, her example being followed by the boy, as soon as he found that White Beard was dead, and could lay him upon a rude couch in the room. But, in this case resistance was useless.

The stampede leaped from their horses with hoarse cries of vengeance, and poured into the cabin by the way of the door and the windows, in overwhelming numbers, and in short order the hag and the boy found themselves prisoners in the hands of the miners.

"Curse you! curse you!" the hag cried, with fierce efforts to free herself. "You have killed my husband, and usurped the rights of our home, but I will have revenge! Hear me swear it, that, though people may invade Buckskin Canyon in thousands, and houses and spires may be erected here, the place shall never prosper. Devastation and ruin shall attack it—road-agents shall plunder it—death shall reach every man that attempts to carry an ounce of gold out of this canyon! I swear it! I curse you, all!"

Some of the men looked a little startled.

Throughout all the Wind River region of Wyoming was Wild Meg known and feared as a strange, mysterious creature, whom many believed to be a veritable witch or leagued with the devil. For years she and White Beard had been known to live in Buckskin Canyon, but the superstitious dread of them, had heretofore caused the miners and prospectors to steer wide of the place. Therefore, her curse was not a thing particularly desirable, and most of the miners looked disturbed and afraid.

One, however, appeared reckless of fear, and he was Black Eph, a notorious ruffian, who had visited nearly every mining strike in the West.

"We don't keer a durned fer yer curses, old woman!" he declared, rudely. "We ain't afeard uv ye, ef ye be a witch, an' all we want o' ye is ter clear out an' leave us in persession. Boys, tie her an' ther b'yee onter two hosses, an put a thorn or sage stalk under their tails ter wake 'em up. Bet a cooky we won't see no more o' ther Witch, fer a dog's age!"

The old hag began to shriek and curse so terribly now, that she was gagged.

Horses were then produced, and both she and the boy were tied into the saddles; after which thornapple brush was fastened in under the tail of each horse, and they were turned loose.

With almost human shrieks, they dashed off down the canyon at break-neck speed, wild with pain, and bearing the woman and the youth into unseen perils, and leaving the stampede masters of the situation.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUNSET CHASE OF THE BRANDED BROWS.

ANOTHER lapse of six years, and we once more take up the thread of our romance.

The sun was going down the horizon, and bathing the mountains in a farewell glory of

golden light, one balmy June day; the perfumed western breeze was lulling nature into a sweet repose; even the dark recesses of Buckskin Canyon seemed pregnant with the balmy peace of the approaching night, until the drowsy echoes were startled by the rapidly approaching clatter of hoofs.

Nearer and nearer they came, accompanied alternately by yells of triumph, and yells of defiance.

Finally, from around a bend in the canyon, swept a band of horsemen at full tilt—a wild-looking set of fellows, attired in tanned buckskin, and armed to the teeth.

One startling peculiarity about their appearance was a *branded mask* upon their faces—a black, scar-like belt that ran across each man's countenance, beginning just below the bridge of the nose, and ending half-way in the middle of the forehead, just above the brows. It was no mask, but a brand of black, upon the skin itself, and gave the party a most strange appearance.

Most of the men wore beards, but the single horseman who led the advance, was yet a mere youth, evidently, for he wore no beard of any kind, and was smaller in frame than the others.

There were some eight or ten in the party, and they were urging their animals to their greatest speed, which fact was accounted for when shortly after the appearance of the Branded Brows, another body of horsemen swept into view, around the bend, in hot pursuit. Four times as many were there in the numerical count of the pursuers, as in the pursued, and their attire proclaimed them to be miners.

The Branded Brows, however, were in no immediate danger, unless their horses gave out, for they were out of easy rifle range, and gaining ground, if anything.

"Halt, there! 'tis useless for you to seek to escape," shouted the leader of the miners, a large, broad-shouldered man, with silvered beard and hair. "We will pursue you to the end of the earth, but what we'll have you."

"But you won't get me, nor my men!" the young captain of the Branded Brows retorted, coolly. "You had better take your miner dogs back to Placer City, General Hathaway, and by so doing save their lives!"

"Ha! ha! I'll risk their lives. When you and your black-browed devils surrender, we will go back. On! boys—on! Five hundred dollars to the man who captures Solid Sam, alive!"

"Ha! ha!" the young outlaw laughed back. "I'll give five hundred additional, myself, to the lucky man! On, pards, on!"

Fiercely then did the pursuers and the pursued urge on their already foaming horses, through the long, level canyon, which stretched for miles away, into the heart of the Wind River Mountains, the clatter of the iron-shod hoofs arousing echoes that mayhap had never been aroused before.

On—on—on they dashed, silence reigning in the stead of the previous cries—the miners who had taken upon themselves to do Vigilante service, resolutely determined not to let the notorious gang of road-agents escape.

For six months this unknown band of branded browed men had played the road-agent in Buckskin Canyon, in the most bold and daring man-

ner, and with a success that no amount of vigilance or precaution appeared to baffle.

Not a stage or a miner left the canyon in any direction, without being halted, summarily.

Hordes of these same Branded Brows were scattered through the mountains and canyons, and the leading spirit of them all was a bold, reckless person of youthful years, whom nobody knew except by his reputed "handle" of Solid Sam.

On—on—on sped the chase, the speed gradually lessening instead of increasing, for the horses of either party were hard blown by the long race, and were flagging out.

Solid Sam noticed this with a fierce glitter in his eagle eye, and also noted the fact that the pursuers were slowly gaining on them.

"On, boys—urge on your horses, or they will get into short rifle-range yet!" he cried. "If they do, our jig is up, fer they're four to our one."

The Branded Brows seemed fully aware of this, but there was no help for it, for, urge their jaded steeds though they did, they could not close their eyes to the fact that the enemy was slowly but surely gaining on them. Solid Sam saw this too, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a curse.

"It's no use o' torturin' the horses, boys," he said, finally. "We're losin', and the first we know we'll get a dose of round lead in our backs. We may as well make a stand and fight it out!"

"You go on, captain, and we'll stay and fight it out!" one of the men suggested—a young man, nearer the young chief's age.

Solid Sam flushed indignantly.

"Lieutenant Breeze, you do me a great injustice!" he replied, chidingly. "While I have led the Branded Brows have you ever known me to desert my men, no matter what scrape we've got into? No, sir! I'll stick to the gang till the last. Ha! what did I tell you?"

Even as he spoke the towering canyon walls echoed the report of a score of rifles, and a yell of victory came from the pursuers.

Four of the Branded Brows threw up their arms and dropped forward upon their horses' necks, and even with the shadow of death creeping over them, they had the presence of mind to lock their arms about the necks of the animals, and were accordingly not dismounted.

Instantly Solid Sam and the other remaining outlaws wheeled their horses toward the Vigilantes, and opened fire, with their deadly Winchester rifles.

Six of the miners were hit, more or less seriously, and dropped behind, while the remainder came on, firing and yelling like a pack of bloodthirsty Comanches.

Bravely the Branded Brows stood their ground, and returned the fire with telling effect, for the number of the Vigilante band diminished rapidly.

But not without company, for one by one the road-agents dropped off, until only Solid Sam and Lieutenant Breeze alone faced the enemy, wounded, but still able to attend to business.

"It's no use of standing longer!" the young captain said. "Make another spurt, and see if we can't get away!"

Accordingly they once more wheeled their horses, and applied the spurs vigorously, and the noble animals responded with a brave effort.

Fortunately for the two fugitives, the Vigilantes were not supplied with breech-loading or magazine rifles, and, after each shot was fired, it was several moments ere they could reload.

Having discharged their weapons, to a man, upon the instant before Sam and Breeze resumed their flight, the interval required for reloading gave the fugitives a chance to get once more out of range.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Solid Sam yelled, shaking his fist back at the pursuing Vigilantes, triumphantly. "We're ahead again, my noble General Hathaway, and once more we defy you, as we've got it all our own way now."

"How do you mean?" Breeze demanded, anxiously.

"I'll soon show you. Below here is the deer trail that leads up through the Hedge Pine slope onto the hog-back. It's a road I was over once, and is our nearest route to the peak."

The lieutenant nodded, and they dashed on. Soon they rounded another bend in the canyon, and here the walls retreated into gradually steep slopes, which were covered with pines, grown close together.

Wheeling his horse from the canyon, Solid Sam led the way over a path that penetrated the pine jungle; Lieutenant Breeze followed.

The path was a deer trail, and was narrow and tortuous, but the animal of Solid Sam followed it with as much ease as would an old trailer.

The route now lay up-hill, and it was impossible for horses to go faster than a walk; accordingly the two fugitives allowed their fagged-out steeds to take it leisurely, for the young chief well understood that the pursuers would not be apt to indulge in any random racing through the thick forest.

"Maybe they'll conclude it ain't healthiest for them to follow us now," Breeze remarked.

"Don't fear that. They'll follow us until we get to the Devil's Abyss, at least," Solid Sam replied. "Then, I reckon, some of 'em will halt."

"You're right; they will," the lieutenant agreed, with a nod. "I don't believe they've got a horse that can leap across."

"If they had, there's not a man among them with pluck enough to attempt it."

Loud yells in the rear now announced that the Vigilantes had discovered the fugitives' escape, if not the direction in which they had gone.

But the fact did not materially alarm Solid Sam, for he kept on, steadily, a quiet smile lingering about his handsome mouth.

For an hour or more, both he and Breeze followed the tortuous ascending trail through the pine wood, and like vengeful sleuths, the Vigilantes were heard dogging behind.

Night closed in, but an early moon, nearly at its full, soon arose, and shot strangely grotesque bars of light down through the pine branches.

Finally, the fugitives emerged from the forest upon a stretch of mountainous table-land, hundreds of feet above the canyon bottom.

Once out of the gloomy woodland, the night

assumed a more brilliant aspect, with a horizon of ethereal haziness, a soft blue sky, and a soaring moon which diffused a flood of mellow light upon the wild but picturesque landscape.

Before the fugitives stretched a line or chain of mountains, on the right and left of which yawned frightful abysses. This natural hog-back was smooth and level, and of considerable length, stretching away toward the northwest.

"Ah! I see where we are now," Breeze ejaculated, as they emerged from the pines. "We can indeed laugh at the Vigilantes."

"I should feel somewhat like laughing myself, were it not that we've lost so many of the band," Solid Sam replied, sadly. "But, the poor fellows shall not go unavenged. I am just beginning to wake up to the fact that I have not given the miners of Buckskin Gulch a strong enough deal. They shall have cause to fear me and my vengeance even more in the future, than they have in the past!"

"Bravo, Captain Sam! As usurpers of your rights, they have no right to expect that you will submit to their invasion. By right of the testament of old White Beard, the canyon is yours."

"Ay! mine and Wild Meg's—the whole tract covered by Placer City, and the mines. Curse them! They drove us from the claim, six years ago, but it has not been a very profitable job. Ten of those who drove us off have gone up Salt River by the usual boat—five more have died with their boots on, and seven have got their pass through the kindness of the Black Brows. A large number yet remain, but Placer City will be an unlucky town for 'em."

"Why is it that General Hathaway bears you so great an enmity, captain?" Breeze demanded, as they spurred along, side by side.

"Perhaps because I bear his name. I know of no other reason," the young outlaw replied. "Then, too, as you know, I've made it a practice of late to toll his interests, he being one of the wealthiest of the Placer Cityites. Six years ago, when Wild Meg and I were driven from the placer mines, that we had worked for a number of years, we jointly took an oath, that we should have a portion of what was rightfully our own, by tolling every miner or grist of gold, at each and every opportunity. That's how I became a road-agent."

It was evident, from his tone and expression, that he felt bitter toward those miners and adventurers who had turned their quiet canyon claim of six years before, into a noisy, bustling shanty mining city of the present.

Further conversation was now cut short, for the Vigilantes at this juncture emerged from the forest in their rear, and with fierce yells struck spurs to their animals, in hot pursuit.

Solid Sam and the lieutenant also increased the speed of their animals, and the pursuers and pursued again dashed rapidly through the moonlight.

Half an hour went by; then the Branded Brows suddenly lashed their animals forward, and were seen to leap forward seemingly through mid-air, but what was in reality a yawning gulf—a mighty seam that split the hog-back in twain!

A good fifteen feet did the trained steeds of the road-agents leap, to a safe footing upon the further side, and then dashed on, while Solid Sam and Bill Breeze gave vent to a triumphant yell of victory.

When safely out of rifle range upon the further side, Solid Sam drew rein, and waited for the Vigilantes to arrive at the opposite edge of the abyss, which they did, with cries and curses of rage.

"Ha! ha! gents! I thought you were going to carry Solid Sam back with you to Placer City, to-night, as a special guest of a little neck-tie party!" the young chief of the Branded Brows cried, mockingly. "Rather made a miscalculation, didn't ye?—or are you going to follow me still?"

"Curses on you, boy!" General Hathaway cried, fiercely. "I order you to surrender at once!"

"Oh, ye do, eh? Well, I can't see the point of that little joke. If you're going to order 'em, I'll pass, and you can take the trick. Ha! ha! see the point of that, don't ye? I'm going to pass out of your reach just as nice as a slippery eel. Hate to tear myself away from such eligible company, but I must bid you good-evening—that is, *au revoir*. Tra! la! la! till I come down to Placer City the next time after my customary toll."

And with a laugh, he wheeled his horse and rode leisurely away, accompanied by Breeze, leaving the miner Vigilantes in a state of rage bordering on frenzy.

CHAPTER II.

THE CAVE RETREAT—THE PLACER CITY SENSATION.

SOLID SAM and Lieutenant Breeze, after leaving the baffled Vigilantes, rode on along the hog-back for perhaps half an hour, when they came to its termination in the form of a round mountain, three sides of which sloped nearly perpendicularly downward into a frightful yawning gulch, while the fourth side connected with the mountain table-land, or hog-back.

At the point of connection there was a large black hole in the face of the mountain, from which gleamed a cheery light, and into which Solid Sam and the lieutenant rode.

The interior proved to be a high cavern of considerable size, and was the retreat of the Branded Brows.

One portion was used as stabling for the horses of the band, while the other part was occupied by the outlaws themselves. A fire burned in the center of this section, to keep off the chill and damp of the cold rocks, and around this a half-dozen fellows and an old, repulsive hag of a woman, were sitting upon camp-stools, engaged in smoking pipes, as Solid Sam and the lieutenant entered.

They arose with grunts of surprise when they noted that the two returned alone.

"How is this?" the hag demanded—who, by the way, was Wild Meg, the Witch. "Why is it you come back *alone*, Sam? why is it, I say?"

Solid Sam slipped from the saddle and gave his horse over into the charge of one of the outlaws, ere he vouchsafed a reply.

"Because we got chased by a gang of the Placer City miners, and lost every man but Breeze and I," he said, finally.

"It's partly your fault, too, for I shouldn't have gone yet for a week, if it hadn't been for you."

"Pooh! the loss of the men is trifling, when we can easily get more. Did you make a raise from the outward bound stage this morning?" the Witch asked, eagerly.

"No; the usual stage did not leave the town."

"Why did it not?"

"I don't know, exactly. There's a pile of gold scattered about the camp among the mine-owners, and they're trying for a chance to work its passage out of the place without my knowing it."

"Ha! curse them!" the Witch exclaimed, darkening with rage. "They have usurped our claim and driven us from it, and now they would beat us out of the revenue we have exacted. Curse them, I say!"

"Curses won't hurt them no more than the bite of a mosquito," Solid Sam replied, with a smile. "They think that the mines of Buckskin Canyon are rightfully theirs, and that we are committing a gross sin by 'robbing the stage,' as they call it, and tolling the bank of such pilgrims as have made their pile and started for other parts. So they've organized a Vigilance gang, and as a result, I got started out of town to-day, and the whole of us got chased up the canyon. All the band went down with their boots on, facing the music, except me an' Breeze, an' we escaped."

Wild Meg paced about the cavern for several moments in silence, but the picture of consuming fury.

She was an uncanny looking creature, at the best, with her wrinkled, ugly countenance, and thin, angular form, and her manner of dress in no way enhanced her beauty, for she wore a flaring red skirt, tattered and ragged, and a dirty green waist, belted, and the belt containing a half-dozen heavy cavalry pistols. No covering she wore upon her wild, disheveled hair, that the frosts of many years had streaked with silver, and her feet were also bare.

Six of the toes were gone—cut off close to the body of the foot, and the most remarkable part of the matter was that she had cut them off herself—one on each yearly anniversary of the death of her former husband, White Beard—and strung them upon a wire about her shriveled neck!

Her motive no one could ascertain—not even Solid Sam, who had been cared for by her from early years up to an age when he was able to take care of himself; but she had been heard to grimly declare, that she should continue the dismemberment, as long as she lived, finally winding up by cutting her head off.

For some time she continued to pace to and fro, as if to work off her passion, the eyes of Solid Sam and the Branded Brows following her with doubting glances.

"General Hathaway is at the bottom of this movement?" she finally demanded, stopping short, and gazing at Solid Sam, inquiringly.

"Yes," he replied, "or rather at the head of it, for he led the chase to-day."

"Humph! did you hear anything more concerning him?"

"Yes. He's going to be married, as you have expected. The woman he is to marry came in on the morning stage, accompanied by a young lady she calls her daughter, and a man reported to be General Hathaway's brother."

The Witch started with surprise at this.

"Ha! what is this brother's first name, did you hear?"

"Yes. The general met them at the stage, and welcomed them—the man, as Colonel Carrol Hathaway—the others, the ladies, as Mrs. and Miss Miner."

"Yes, yes, I believe he did have a brother," Wild Meg muttered thoughtfully, as if unmiadful that she had auditors.

"I heard tell of the fellow, Carrol, as a wild, reckless devil, such as the army produces. But, you have not told me, boy, when this proposed marriage of the general takes place? Be spry, now, for I am much concerned. Ha! ha! yes, very much concerned!"

"The wedding comes off to-morrow in mid-forenoon, I believe, at the general's shanty."

"Good! I will be on hand! ha! ha! yes—on hand!" the witch hissed, glaring at the ruddy fire, which burned in the center of the cavern.

Then she turned and opened a large wooden chest near by, and proceeded to haul out dresses of the costliest materials; jewelry, and the numerous articles of a lady's toilet, laughing strangely, the meanwhile.

"I'll go down to the weddin' in style," she chuckled, glaring wildly around. "It's a long time since I dressed up gay, an' painted and puffed. But, I haven't yet forgot the art, an' I'll show 'em how to put on style! Ha! ha! I'll show 'em, and there'll be blood on the altar, too!"

Armed with a rich assortment of feminine paraphernalia, the old woman then retired into a sort of inner cavern, to make her preparations.

Where six years before had stood a rude log cabin in Buckskin Canyon, now rose a miniature mining city—a collection of shanties, tenanted for a variety of purposes, as dwellings, stores, offices, saloons, gambling-hells and dance-houses—quite a respectable-sized young city, too, and called Placer, or Placer City.

Some two thousand souls claimed this city of the gulch as its regular and average floating population, and the fact of its constant growth and the addition to its people was mainly owing to the richness and seemingly inexhaustible supply of its mineral resources.

Since six years before, when the stampede had taken possession of the canyon, by killing the hermit, White Beard, and driving off the Witch, it had panned out largely, and slowly but surely grown better.

The sandy formation of the bottom was strongly "salted" with gold, and for a mile and a half up and down the gulch, from the former site of the hermit's cabin, claims innumerable were located, the larger share of them in the control of monopolist speculators, with a few belonging to single individuals.

General Guy Hathaway was the big man of Placer City. Every place has to have a sort of

leading citizen, and such a person the aged general was to the little mining strike in Buckskin Gulch. He owned five different mines in company with a man whose name was Sydney Atherton, or Santa Fe Syd, and a large interest in the shanties of the town belonged to him.

His income from the five placer claims was estimated at a thousand dollars a day, and besides this, he and Atherton had a drift drilled into the rocky wall of the canyon, with good prospects for another rich strike.

Being a man of commanding figure and dignity, and one of the original stampedeers, he had been universally looked up to as a sort of leading citizen.

If a dispute occurred, or any advice was needed, the general was always looked to to decide the matter. His wealth he spread about with a liberal hand, and he grew to be the most popular man in the gulch.

Placer City, perhaps, you cannot find upon the maps, for, being hidden away in the wild fastnesses of the still wilder Wind River Mountains, with only two stages daily communicating with the outside world, it has not gained any notoriety as a mining center, more than has a hundred other similar strikes. Some two hundred rude shanties and cabins were scattered about in the vicinity of the hermit's old cabin, two of which served the purpose of gambling dens, fourteen as saloons where "tanglefoot" was dispensed to thirsty pilgrims, one as a smithy, and another as a combined grocery, dry-goods store and post-office. Then, there were a couple of dance-houses nightly in full blast, a newspaper office, from which was issued the *Daily Progress*, a cabin used for a church, and the old hermit's cabin, now turned into the only hotel in the place.

The citizens were, as a rule, the same class found in all mining towns—a mixed mass of humanity of many different nations and natures, the adventurous class and the ruffianly element largely predominating.

On the day following the night that had witnessed the race between the Vigilantes and the Branded Brows, Placer City was alive with excitement, for in mid-forenoon, General Hathaway was to take to himself a wife in the person of a charming lady of Chicago, who had already arrived. This fact, together with another, which was that this was the first matrimonial event on the Placer City records, created an extraordinary sensation, and the miners to a man, laid aside the pan and shovel, to indulge in a holiday, in honor to the general.

And when the hour came for the consummation of the nuptials every man, woman and child that could, crowded into the rude church.

The general and the bridal party had luckily taken refuge in the "church" ahead of the crowd, and consisted of the general in person, a portly man, well dressed, and somewhat dignified in his bearing, with silvered brown hair and beard, and eyes of the same hue. Next came the bride-to-be, a richly-attired lady of five-or-six-and-thirty years—comely in face and form, with dark hair and eyes, the latter piercing in their glances.

The groomsman, Colonel Hathaway; a brother of the general, was a tall well-formed man, with

immense fiery red side-whiskers, and a countenance inclined to be rather prepossessing, but for the sensual expression about his mouth. He was richly and flashily attired, and appeared rather disdainful in his bearing.

The bridemaid, Miss May Miner, who was said to be the bride's daughter by a former marriage, was a very pretty and modest-looking maiden of seventeen or eighteen, richly attired, and looking very charming, with her fair countenance, soft golden hair, and eyes of sparkling blue. And the rough audience at once decided that she was the one best fitted for the general's wife.

CHAPTER III.

SHOT AT THE ALTAR—THE WILL.

AFTER the patience of the crowd had become nearly exhausted at the long wait before the "splicing" took place, the general led his lady forward to a space that had been reserved by the groomsman and bridemaid. The minister, Jim Byles, by name, then read the customary marriage service, in a loud voice, concluding with the following deviation:

"Do you, General Hathaway, take this hyar woman fer yer legally wedded wife, an' sw'ar by the pin't o' yer bowie knife, ter hang tew her, in ther journey thru this weary vale o' tears?"

"I do!" the general replied, with a faint smile.

"An' do you, marm, promise ter hang ter ther general, ditto, an' pervide his repasts, an' be a luv'in' wife, wi'out lookin' bias at uther pilgrims?"

"I do," Mrs. Miner said, a trifle haughtily, for this uncouth fashion of marriage law of Placer City, did not impress her very favorably, she being a city bred lady, and not a little proud and supercilious.

"Then in ther name o' ther great and only Jehova, I, Jim Byles, minister o' ther Gospel, do turn ther key in ther padlock, an' prononnce ye man and wife. Whom God hath joined ter-gether, let no man put asunder."

"Ha! ha! whom God hath joined together, I will put asunder!" shrieked a wild voice, and the next instant a pistol report rung loudly through the room.

With a groan General Hathaway clutched his garments in the neighborhood of his heart, and staggered back into Colonel Carrol Hathaway's arms.

With a wild shout from the crowd, all eyes were turned toward one of the windows of the cabin, where the repulsive face of Wild Meg, the Witch, was seen glaring into the church.

It was quickly withdrawn, however, and the next minute the swift clatter of horse's feet was heard.

While some of the spectators rushed out of the church to give chase, others crowded forward, to get a peep at the wounded man.

"My God, brother Guy, are you killed?" Colonel Carrol cried, anxiously, as he supported the general to a seat, while the new Mrs. Hathaway drew near, with a whitening face. "Where did the bullet strike you?"

"In the region of my heart," was the faint reply. "I'm done for, so carry me home, for there is much I must attend to, ere I die!"

"Will some one assist in carrying the general to the shanty he occupies?" the colonel demanded, glancing around.

A half-dozen of able-bodied men instantly volunteered their services, and the general was raised and borne from the church up the street to his rude but commodious shanty, where he was laid upon a bed, in a neatly-furnished bed-chamber. He was pretty well exhausted, by this time, but a doctor soon came, and administered remedies that revived him, in a measure. An examination of the wound proved that there was no help for the big citizen of Placer City, for, while it did not bleed outwardly, it did inwardly, and he was rapidly filling up.

When apprised of this fact by the surgeon, he smiled, faintly.

"Yes, I am going to die, and by the hand of a creature I don't know—a wild roving lunatic, who has often threatened me with her babble, but whom I have never paid the least attention to. Doctor, how long have I to live?"

"It is hard to determine," was the grave reply. "You may survive twenty-four hours, and, again, may not live over an hour. If you have anything to attend to, you had better do it at once."

The mine-owner was silent a few moments, as he lay back on his pillow, as if in meditation.

The colonel, the new bride, and her daughter, together with the parson, Jim Byles, and the surgeon "Doc" Lee, constituted the five who were gathered about the death-bed.

"I am very rich," General Hathaway finally said, as if talking aloud to himself. "I have a million dollars saved up, in pure gold coin and greenbacks, besides my mines, worth at least a million more. This wealth I cannot take with me, and shall have to leave it to some of you, I suppose."

There was rather a regretful expression to his tone, as much as if he was loth to leave his riches behind, and his eyes wandered over the faces of those around him, critically.

Despite any efforts they may have made to conceal it, there was an eager, hopeful expression upon the faces of Colonel Carrol, and the new Mrs. Hathaway, which seemed to suggest plainly that they were ready and over-willing to step into the dead man's shoes.

The general seemed to notice this, and a gleam of cunning shot into his eyes.

"You two need not look so hopeful," he said, decidedly, "for I perceive the drift of your thoughts, and shall baffle you by cutting you off, short of your expectations. Wouldn't you be pleased to have me leave the whole of the property and cash to one or the other of you? Ha! ha! undoubtedly you would. Your feet are probably itching to pull on my shoes. Ha! ha! that would be nice, but I shall baffle you!"

"Guy, my dear brother, you do both your wife and me a great injustice!" the colonel said, evidently chagrined at the pointed accusation. "Neither of us have the least hope or desire of becoming your heirs. Indeed, we wish you to use your own judgment in making your devise,

believing that we shall be perfectly satisfied with it."

"Of course, dear husband," Mrs. Hathaway said, bending over and touching the forehead of the dying man with her lips. "You must not carry such an unjust suspicion, that we have any mercenary motives. We all dearly love you, alone for your own sake and not for what you are worth."

"Humph! *maybe*," the general replied, gruffly, "but, I shall take care you do not deceive me. Byles, will you go summon Lawyer Green, and Santa Fe Syd to appear before me?" The parson nodded, and donning his slouch hat took his departure.

"Who is this Santa Fe Syd, brother?" Colonel Hathaway asked.

"His real name is Atherton, and I shall appoint him my executor. He has a half-interest with me in each of my gold-mines, and is perfectly trustworthy," the general replied.

The lawyer and Santa Fe Syd soon arrived.

The former was a "skinny," shrunk, shriveled little man, with beardless face, sharp, twinkling little eyes, and reddish hair, while his attire seemed to indicate that he had not as yet amassed a large fortune at the pursuit of his profession.

The miner, Sydney Atherton, was a stalwart, handsome fellow of thirty years, although he looked five years younger, with a fresh, good-natured countenance, lit up by a pair of resolute blue eyes; blonde hair and mustache, and a well-proportioned form clad in miner's habiliments, from the inevitable top-boots to the slouch hat upon his head.

"General Hathaway, they tell me you are badly wounded," he said, approaching the bed, and taking the dying mine-owner's hand. "Is there not something that can be done for you?"

"No—I'm past human aid, for I am filling up with the blood that only flows internally," was the reply. "I sent for you, Atherton, because I know you are honest. I *know* you are honest, because you have ever dealt so with me. I want to make a will, and appoint you executor of my estate, and have you see that everything is done as I want it. By the way, I will make you acquainted with Mrs. Hathaway, my wife of a few moments, Colonel Carrol Hathaway, my brother, and Miss May Miner, my step-daughter!"

Santa Fe Syd turned and bowed to the trio in acknowledgment of the introduction, giving a surprised start, as his eyes rested upon Mrs. Hathaway, and her daughter.

But, quickly concealing the surprise he probably experienced, he turned to the mine-owner.

"I am happy to meet your friends, general," he said, "and think that it would probably be better to intrust the settlement of your affairs to your brother."

"No! no! I will have no relative of mine controlling my business. You are the man I want, if you will accept."

"To accommodate you, sir, I will act for you to the best of my ability," Santa Fe Syd replied, bowing.

"Very well. Lawyer Green, prepare the form of a will, and get ready to jot down my be-

quests. Sydney, you remember that, several days ago, you made me an offer for my interests in the mining claims, which I promised to consider."

"I did, sir."

"I have thought the matter over, and concluded to accept the offer. You have the cash at your command, I suppose, when it is wanted?"

"I have, sir. The offer I made you was seven hundred thousand dollars, I believe?"

"It was," the general replied.

"But, see here!" the colonel interposed. "I do not believe you can sell this property without your wife's consent."

"Aha! I thought you'd show your cloven foot," the dying man said, fiercely.

"I think I see through the intricacies of a whole accursed game. I think I can see why you invited me, a year ago, to your home in Chicago, and entertained me like a prince, and constantly sung in my ears unbounded praises of yonder woman until I grew blind and promised to marry her. You foresaw that I would marry her, and God only knows how much more. You plotted anyhow so that you calculated you would get possession of a share of my wealth—if not by actual gift, or devise from me, from that woman I have just made my wife, and whom I have suspected of being in league with you. But, curse you, I'll block that little game! The mines were literally bargained for before this marriage; all that was left for me to do being to close the bargain by refusal or acceptance. That puts me without property, and no wife can attach money that has been accumulated or disposed of by agreement previous to a marriage. Lawyer Green, is this not the law in Wyoming?"

"I believe it is," the pettifogger replied. "The general has a legal right to act as it has pleased him in this matter, as if it were personal property."

"It must be a devilish queer law they have up here in Wyoming, then," the colonel replied, sullenly.

"Queer enough to thwart all your schemes, Carroll!" the general retorted. "Mr. Atherton, please note my bequests. Lawyer Green, are you ready?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Then, listen: I, Guy C. Hathaway, being in full possession of all my mental faculties, do, upon my death-bed, make the following last will and testamentary bequests of my personal wealth, with a prayer that God may pardon all my sins, and prevent all wrangling and ill-feeling on the part of my remembered and disremembered heirs. To Sydney Atherton, my former business and confidential partner, I do hereby bequeath the whole of my moneyed possessions, consisting of one million and seven hundred thousand dollars in gold and greenbacks, on the following conditions: That he shall court and if possible wed my step-daughter, May Miner, daughter of my wife at the time of my decease. Should such an alliance be effected, within a proper length of time—say a month—said Sydney Atherton, who is to keep the money in execution of my will, up to that period, is to divide the amount with his bride,

upon the altar, after the marriage. Should such an alliance not be effected, said Sydney Atherton forfeits all claim to the fortune, and simply retains it in his keeping subject to the second clause, which is, if Colonel Carroll Hathaway and May Miner become man and wife, on favorable and happy conditions, each is to be delivered a portion, consisting of half of the whole fortune."

"That is perfectly satisfactory," Colonel Hathaway said, blandly. "It places me out of the embarrassing position of being suspected of having a mercenary interest in the making of the will."

"I also am satisfied," Mrs. Hathaway said, taking the cue from the colonel. "I have some money of my own, and May will be as good an heiress as you could have chosen, dear husband."

"Supposing the conditions of the second clause are not fulfilled?" Santa Fe Syd asked.

"Then, you are to pay the whole amount to—"

General Hathaway did not finish the sentence right away, but when he did, he said—"Nobby Noll!"

CHAPTER IV.

WILD MEG NARRATES.

THE will was made, and Lawyer Green presented it and received the general's signature, and also that of Santa Fe Syd and Jim Byles, as witnesses, after which he stored it away in his capacious pocket, and took his departure.

By this time, the dying mine-owner was considerably exhausted, and the physicians ordered that the room be cleared in order that he might have a few moments of quiet.

As Santa Fe Syd was about leaving the shanty, he was overtaken in the kitchen by the new Mrs. Hathaway, who had stealthily followed him, and now introduced her shapely form between him and the door.

"Stop!" she said, authoritatively. "I know you!"

"Oh! you do?" he replied, coolly. "Well?"

"You are not Sydney Atherton—you are Sydney Miner."

"I never give the lie to a lady," the handsome mine-owner said, with a faint smile. "You are undoubtedly mistaken, my dear madam."

"I am not mistaken at all," she replied, in a vexed tone. "I knew you the minute my eyes rested upon you, and you also knew me."

"It is not impossible. A face, or a foe of your magnitude one cannot easily forget. I did recognize you, but kept the recognition a secret. I was not surprised to find you at your old profession of scheming. Do you remember the resolution we adopted at our last meeting, madam?"

"No!"

"Humph! I believe you lie!" the miner said, bluntly. "We passed a resolution, then, that forever hence we were strangers, yet foes, and while we knew each other not to the world, we were to have the privilege of balking each other's interests whenever we so chose."

Mrs. Hathaway scowled.

"I believe there was something said to that effect," she admitted, looking displeased; "but

I, for my part, am truly repentant. I would like to have a long talk with you, Sydney, if you have time."

"Which I have not," he said, decidedly. "As I said before, we do not know each other. I bid you good-day, madam."

"But, hold! you must not go until you have told me whether you mean to fight against me?" she said, hissing, her face whitening, and eyes blazing dangerously.

"To the bitter end!" he replied, sternly. "You may count strong on me, too!"

He then brushed past her, and left the shanty. Standing in the doorway, she gazed after him as he strode down the street, an unreadable expression upon her face.

As she stood thus she was joined by Colonel Carrol Hathaway, who had just come downstairs.

"Ah! so you're watching the executor, are you?" he said with a disguised spice of jealousy in his tone. "I suppose you have already fallen in love with him?"

She wheeled upon him, fiercely.

"No, I hate him, even as much as I love you. You know how much that is," and she laughed a little wildly.

"You might better have said as much to the dying brother up-stairs," he retorted, stroking his huge side-whiskers. "By the way, the doctor thinks he will not live longer than sunrise, to-morrow."

"I hope not!" she said, coldly.

"Then, you are not pleased with the result, so far, eh?—that is, the making of the will?"

"No, I am not!" was the reply. "It was not as either you or I had expected. The old fool suspected too much of the true state of affairs."

"We will cheerfully admit that. Guy was always a hard, grasping, avaricious man, who suspected that everybody was trying to bleed him. Yet of late years, I have always been his sincere admirer, on account of his money. Ha! ha! money is a truly great magnet! But, the will is not so bad, after all. May must marry me, which fixes it all right."

"You forget. The settlement of the matter is in the hands of this Sydney Atherton, who I may as well tell you is my enemy. He will try to marry the girl and thereby shove us out in the cold."

"Curse him! he shall not succeed!"

"You do not know that. He is a stubborn, immovable foe, when he chooses, and is influential, here. Besides, May has a will of her own, and there is no telling when to depend on her."

"If coaxing and persuasion don't fill the bill, there are other ways of bringing a refractory spirit into subjection," the colonel suggested, significantly. "By the way, who is the 'Nobby Nell,' referred to by Guy?"

"I have no idea. You must make inquiries, and find out. Also, it will be well enough to keep on the right side of that lawyer Green!"

The Witch, Wild Meg, after firing the deadly bullet at General Hathaway, paused only long enough to note that it had taken effect, when she wheeled her spirited horse, and dashed away up the gulch main street of the town.

Instant pursuit was given by those who had seen the fatal shot fired, and by others who poured from the church, but all to no purpose. The horse of the Witch was a rapid runner, and she soon left the town behind, laughing wildly at the bullets that hailed around her.

In an hour she was back to the retreat of the Branded Brows, which being her home had been christened Cave Inferno. None of the Branded Brows were present, when the Witch rode into the strange rendezvous, except Solid Sam, who was seated at a table in a distant corner, engaged in smoking a cigar, while he listened to a click! click! of an instrument, which was nothing more or less than a complete telegraph apparatus, in working order.

It was connected with four wires, two of which came in through the entrance to the cave, while the other two made their exit through a crevice in the rocky roof.

This telegraph contrivance was a bit of the young road-agent's ingenuity, by which he had succeeded in having news brought to him from the outside world, and of the movements thereof.

The stage and telegraph line running from Green River City, on the line of the Union Pacific Railway, to Camps Brown and Stambaugh, and other places in the Wind River region, passed over another range of peaks, not over a half-mile from that in which the cavern of the Branded Brows was located. With wire had Solid Sam first supplied himself, and then made his connection and return to the line, passing the wire through the cave, where it was attached to his instrument.

This line connected Placer City with the outside world, and his machine being equipped with a dumb receiver, Solid Sam knew of every message that passed over the wires, whether at his table, or away.

The other wires connected the Sweetwater mines with those at Atlantic City, and also were in circuit with his battery.

"Well, I am back, you see," she said, dismounting. "Where are the band?"

"Out hunting, I guess. Any news from the mines?"

"Yes. General Hathaway is lying at the point of death. He was shot, at the altar, and I am proud of my marksmanship!"

"You shot him?" Solid Sam cried with a shuddering start.

"Yes, and I'll tell you why, directly. How is it you are sitting there? Any news?"

"Yes. The gold-producers of the Buckskin City are plotting to get off a cargo of our rightful gold, without our knowledge. They have telegraphed to Camp Stambaugh their plans as follows: An unsuspecting German, named Fritz Steinburger, will be induced to come over to Placer City with a peddling wagon, and vend his wares. He will find ready sale through the liberality of those in the secret, and will go back to Stambaugh for a new lot of goods. When he goes he will carry with him in his covered wagon the gold of said producers, and deliver it to a banker at Stambaugh, subject to orders I have not yet learned."

Wild Meg stamped her foot, with a fierce malediction—then laughed wildly.

"Fools! do they not know that it will be impossible to cheat you?" she exclaimed.

"They do not know anything of the advantage I have over them, through this," Solid Sam replied, indicating his telegraph instrument.

"But, tell me about the assassination of General Hathaway. Murder is a crime I did not think you capable of."

"Ha! ha! You do not know me—you do not know the rancor and hate of an embittered life. If you did you would not marvel that the sight of Guy Hathaway at the altar frenzied me, and caused me to do a sinful deed. But, you shall hear the story, which I have always kept from you. Listen attentively, without interruption, and I will tell it all to you."

There was a greenish, fiery glitter in the old woman's eyes, and a perceptible tremor to her person, as she seated herself near the Boy Road-Agent and fixed her gaze upon the floor.

It was evident that the memories caused by the proposed rehearsal were of anything but a pleasant or attractive nature.

"To begin with," she said, "I will go back into the far past—nearly half a century ago. At the time of which I speak there lived in the city of New York, a young married couple by the name of Vance, who, being blessed with an infant daughter, were as happy as the day was long. John Vance held a position of trust in one of the city offices, at a goodly salary, and with the love of a then amiable wife, had nothing to yearn for or crave, in his happy existence.

"Little Bethel, their child, was a sweet fairy, and as she grew in years she increased in beauty of both face, form and womanly qualities, until, at the age of seventeen, she stepped upon the threshold of fashionable society, the acknowledged belle of the season.

"Her smiles and society were courted by many a rich and accomplished gallant, much to the anxiety of her parents, who knew the dangers of fashionable associations, but she passed the best of them by in a pleasant, firm way, that could not be misunderstood, and at the same time inspired the deepest admiration of her many suitors.

"This, until she arrived at the age of eighteen when her parents sent her to Paris and Italy. Here she was to finish her musical education in a two years' course of study.

"To her parents Bethel was a loving and obedient daughter, and in their blind affection for her they indulged her in everything she desired. To such an extent, that when she returned to America, after two years' absence, John Vance found that his bank-account was exhausted.

"About a month after Bethel's return, she once more entered metropolitan society, and in a short time became acquainted with a young military officer, Guy Hathaway by name, who was of a good family, and had won a generalship for service in the war.

"The acquaintance soon ripened to infatuation on the part of Bethel, and she wanted to marry young Hathaway on his own terms, which were, that she must deliver to him a sum of fifty thousand dollars, upon the marriage day, which he would invest for her so that it would be cer-

tain to provide a good livelihood for her as long as she lived.

"This proposition she broached at once to her parents, but they promptly refused, agreeing that it was an unmanly scheme on Hathaway's part to swindle her out of the money.

"Moreover, they forbade her to have any further acquaintance with him.

"Bethel was not only disappointed at her failure, but greatly incensed toward her parents, and in anger declared nothing should prevent her from having the young general.

"About this same time, John Vance mortgaged his house and lot and personal property, for a limited number of days, for thirty thousand dollars, seeing an opportunity for a paying investment. As he would not use it in a few days, he deposited it in his desk, at home, in preference to putting it in the bank.

"Well, to make a long story short, the money turned up missing, and the day after this, Bethel was married to Guy Hathaway.

"Knowing, of course, that she had taken it, her father immediately sent a search-warrant after her and the young general, but all to no purpose. No trace of the missing money could be found, and both she and Hathaway denied having any knowledge or possession of it, whatever.

"Shortly afterward, Hathaway received the command of a small fort on the Western frontier, and with Bethel left New York forever.

"The parents of Bethel, having no money to redeem the mortgage, were eventually turned out of house and home, and the friends that once knew them, knew them no more.

"The shock of the great blow which had swept away both child and fortune, was great, and had the same effect on both—to affect their minds with a species of insanity which was a strange mixture of madness and reason.

"They wandered from the city, making their way westward. They grew wild through ill-treatment and privation; folks avoided them because of their shabby appearance—feared them, because of a belief that they were in some way connected or leagued with evil-doers."

CHAPTER V.

SOLID SAM AND HIS FATHER.

"You, then, are the mother of her that was Bethel Vance?" Solid Sam asked.

"I am." White Beard, who was killed six years ago in Buckskin Canyon by the stampede, was her father. By slow stages we wandered into the mining and trapping sections of the West, subsisting mainly upon what we could beg from the campers, or the game we killed.

"Six years after leaving New York, during which time we had heard but once or twice from Bethel, found us located in a wild district in the Yellowstone region. At times reports came back to inquiries we sent to strangers, that Bethel did not live happily with Guy, and the same reports told that, though he often abused her and her two twin children—a little boy and girl—she still bore patiently with him, seeming to be as much infatuated with him as at first.

"One spring—the first of our stay in the Yel-

lowstone country—there came a terrible flood, that brought us back our Bethel—but God knows, as a terrible gift.

"White Beard found her, one day after the flood had subsided, somewhat—her and her little son, both washed upon a bleak point of the river, where the freshet had cast her.

"He recognized her, and brought you home to our humble abode, for he supposed her to be dead. But, unwilling to believe it, he at last went back, and, truly enough, found her alive, but so injured, that she died shortly afterward. Before she did die, however, she told a tale of bitter wrong that had been done her by Guy Hathaway, the culmination of which was his causing a couple of ruffians to kidnap her, and, with her children, send her afloat on the flooded Yellowstone, upon a log-raft. She was wrecked upon the bar, and for many hours lay stunned and bleeding. She remembered, however, of having her two six-year old children bound to her at her last recollection, and as White Beard found her bonds cut, on first discovering her, it was evident some one had arrived ahead of him, and appropriated the little girl.

"Before she died, Bethel also begged forgiveness from her father, which was freely given, and White Beard soothed her in her last moments, promising that he would care for her child, the boy, and make all efforts to find the girl."

"Then, I am the son of Bethel and General Hathaway!" Solid Sam cried, springing to his feet, with a start of surprise.

"You *are*!" the Witch replied, "and I am your grandmother. You can now see why I shot the human monster, your father, for there has not been a day since Bethel died, that I have not registered an oath before high Heaven that Guy Hathaway should never live to treat another wife, as he treated my child."

Solid Sam was silent a few minutes, before he spoke, his gaze riveted upon the floor.

"You did right in speeding that fatal bullet, perhaps," he said, with a voice tremulous with feeling, "for you saved me doing the same awful deed, if you are telling me the truth about him. I already hate him because he was instrumental in the death of my mother!"

"I am telling you the truth, so help me God!" the Witch said, earnestly.

"Before the flood, we used to send with trusty trappers who visited the various places of residence of the Hathaways, and have them make inquiries. As a result, we always received the same reply, literally—Hathaway seemed to hate his wife and children, and abused them shamefully, in addition to letting them suffer for want of the necessities of life, and courting the society of other women!"

"Brute—monster, then, he is, and I have no sympathy for him!" Solid Sam said, fiercely. "Did you kill him outright?"

"No, I didn't. I am no fool. I meant that he should live long enough to make his will. You are his heir—the only rightful one I know of. He must leave his property to you, and if your sister is ever found, we will share it with her. Go at once, lest you be too late, and make known to him your identity. Tell him all I have told you; and lying at the point of death

as he is, he will not dare disown you or refuse to do what is right."

"True. If I have a right to his property I am to have it, for I shall never get what I don't fight for, it appears. I will drop in upon him to-night, when matters are quiet, in Placer City, and if you do not see me back in several days, do not be surprised."

"You will need to be careful!" Wild Meg said, with a shake of her head, "for the miners and roughs down there are bitter against you, and I saw a half a dozen reward papers posted up about the town, offering five hundred dollars for your capture."

"Ha! ha! let them paste the whole town with such papers, and I'll yet snap my fingers at them and whistle at their curses in defiance. But, to prepare against trouble, I'll take Fleet-wind with me."

One of the pockets of Solid Sam's jacket was curiously constructed, being lined with sieve wire, and protected by a buttoned lapel. Going to a little cage in one portion of the cave, he took forth a small but plump carrier pigeon, around whose downy throat was fastened a tiny blue ribbon, that in turn was tied to a bit of paper.

Opening his pocket, he shoved the bird gently into it, and then fastened the lapel to its place with a button.

The cause of the wire pocket now became obvious. While the outer view of the coat remained unchanged, the inside was left so that air could circulate freely through this novel, but excellent bird-cage.

Arming himself well, Solid Sam then mounted a large gray horse, and took his departure. Pursuing a short route across the mountains he was not long in reaching the Buckskin Canyon, where he dismounted, and continued on his way toward Placer City on foot, first having secreted his horse from the view of the trail.

Wild Meg had never to his knowledge lied to him, and therefore the young outlaw had no reason to believe that she had deceived him in narrating the wrongs instigated by the leading citizen of Placer City.

That night, General Hathaway lay upon his bed, alone in his room, the doctor having retired for a short nap.

Unable to sleep, the mine-owner lay there with probably anything but pleasant thoughts, for there was a troubled expression upon his face.

It was about this time that a door softly opened, to admit a dark figure, wrapped in a blanket—a man, with his slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

The hat was raised as the new-comer approached the bedside, however, and the general gave vent to a gasp of surprise and horror.

"Solid Sam! the road-agent!" he uttered, huskily.

"The same, sir," Solid Sam replied, coolly, as he covered the invalid with his revolver. "Don't be at all noisy in your demonstrations, or I shall have to silence you. Do you know me, Guy Hathaway?"

"No—no more than as the accursed outlaw of the canyon!" was the fierce reply.

"Then it is time that you did know me," Solid Sam replied. "I am *your* son, rightfully, lawfully—the only son resulting from your union with Bethel Vancel!"

General Hathaway uttered a smothered curse.

"You lie!" he gasped, paling before the stern gaze of the Boy Road-Agent. "I have no son living. My first wife and children died years ago, and you are a scheming impostor!"

"How did your wife and children die?" Solid Sam asked, fiercely. "Dare you own the truth, sir, lying as you are at the point of death?"

The mine-owner groaned and averted his face, upon which there was a ghastly expression of terror.

"Go on!" he gasped. "If you have anything to say, I will hear you through."

"You are my father, although I am in no way or manner proud of the fact. Because of your crimes and villainy, it is not strange that I do not bear you either the love or good-will of a son. How long have I wondered what mystery surrounded my early life, but was unable to learn or conceive until to-day, when Wild Meg came to the front and granted the information—the whole strange story of how you had wedded her daughter, Bethel Vance—how you had caused Bethel, my mother, to steal a large sum of money from her parents, which caused their financial ruin; how you had emigrated to the West; how they had learned of your constant abuse of your wife and children; how they found Bethel and one child—the little boy—wrecked upon the blood-stained shore of the Yellowstone, one spring, and received from her a confession of your wrongs against her, the culmination of which was your causing her to be set adrift on the flood, with her children, calculating, of course, that you would never be troubled by them again. Ah! Guy Hathaway, even though you are my father, I can but hate you for your black, brutal, villainous past!"

"You are not to blame for hating me, boy, if you are indeed my son. I *was* a brute in those days—inspired by an evil, reckless nature, over which I had not the mastery. I don't ask you to forgive me, or even regard me with respect, for I do not deserve it. But, go on—tell me if Bethel escaped alive, and what became of the other child?"

"My poor mother only lived long enough, the Witch says, to confess her woes to White Beard, who found her; then she died. I was the only child that White Beard found when he discovered her, but some other person had been upon the spot ahead of him, and without doubt, carried away my little sister, of whom no trace has ever been found since."

General Hathaway was silent for several minutes, his face covered by his hands.

"All I can now do is to be penitent, and pray to God for forgiveness and pardon," he said, slowly. "I am sorry—have been sorry for years, but could not recall the dead to life. I will not crave your forgiveness, for you would probably not accord it."

"You are right. The story I heard from Wild Meg was enough to set me against you. Besides, as a citizen of Placer City, you have not particularly endeared yourself to me, by the unselfish interest you have manifested in

your attempts to make me die by the Vigilantes. My principal reason in coming here, on learning that you are my father, is to induce you to make your will in my favor."

"No. That is impossible. The will is already made, and I cannot change it."

"Will not, you mean?"

"Yes, if you like. I do not owe you anything. Indeed, I have no conclusive proof that you are not an impostor?"

"Dare you doubt me? Lying at the point of death, can you not see that I am the only one who would come forward, and give such strong proof? You know I am your son, sir—have known it, or suspected it, maybe, all along, which accounted for your enmity against me!"

"Whether I have, or not, I decline to say!" the miner-owner replied, stolidly. "At any rate, I shall not leave you a penny. My prospects for the future are dark, and I may as well continue as I did before, as I have no faith that a change for the better would help me, now. Kill me, if you choose, as it will not make much difference whether I die now, or a few hours hence."

"No!" Solid Sam replied, rising. "There is One who will give you your just deserts more effectually than I can do. I will, however, have a share of the wealth you refuse to bequeath to me—to that I swear! I now bid you good-by, forever; may God have more mercy upon your soul than I could have!"

Then the Boy Road-Agent took his departure, as silently as he came.

The next morning Placer City was acquainted with the fact that General Hathaway was dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POST-OFFICE AND THE POSTMISTRESS.

THE night following the one on which Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent, had visited the general—now lying a corpse at his shanty, up the gulch—was a beautiful one, with a balmy breath of radiant nature blowing up from the south, and a gloriously bright moon soaring through the heavens' blue dome, with its brilliant settings of starry diamonds.

Notwithstanding the great beauty of the night, and the fact that crowds of people were out upon the Rialto of Placer City, as the simple gulch street had been christened by some one, more out of sarcasm than admiration, other crowds of humanity were congregated in saloons and places of amusement, but the most characteristic representation of Placer City citizens was to be found at the "post-office."

This was the principal hang-out of that class who did not as a rule frequent the saloons and dance-houses, and also of many of those who did.

"Mail-time" was the ripe time to find the crowd there, and to-night was no exception to the usual gathering.

The "post-offis," as an establishment, occupied a large cabin, some fifty feet wide by seventy long, and answered, in addition to its official calling, that of a general supply store, a news and cigar stand.

The office in question was a partitioned apart-

ment in the rear end of the building, with a pigeon-hole of moderate size opening out into the store-room, into which each pilgrim was obliged to shout his name, and if any mail awaited them, he received it back through this aperture.

A door opened from this office behind each of two counters, which flanked either side of the cabin, and admitted of one person attending to the several businesses connected with the establishment.

Placer City was proud of its postmaster, or rather postmistress, for it was a woman who superintended the business—a dashing, vivacious, irrepressible young woman, whom everybody admired, and yet feared to "rile." Miss Nell Nugent was said to be her name, but universally she was known simply as Nobby Nell.

Who she was, or where she had come from, was among the uncertainties.

Once upon a time, in the early existence of Placer City as a mining-camp, Bill Simpson, who had been deputed P. M., was invited to a "neck-tie party" by the citizens, for fingering the contents of the mails, and when the question was put who was to fill Simpson's boots, Nobby Nell had put in an appearance, and begged the "city fathers" to turn the position over to her.

A little fifteen-year-old midget she was, at the time, attired in a hunting-suit of elaborately-decorated buckskin, with the inevitable slouch hat and top boots, and a mining outfit strapped to her back; and, impressed with her frank, independent appearance, the "city" dignitaries had installed her "boss" of the post-office.

Little by little she had saved up money from her salary, and by what she made at weighing auriferous, until, at the time we enter the post-office, she owned the building and the whole stock of merchandise in addition to retaining her position of postmistress.

Few women in Placer City were there who did not have some cause to have some envy of Miss Nobby Nell Nugent, for the miners and men generally admired her, and then, she was pretty, which was a secret, perhaps, why the crowd always managed to saunter into the post-office, hours before each mail was due.

Let us take a peep into the aforesaid office. Some thirty or forty men are collected within, ranged along the counters—a strangely contrasted array of humanity, both in face and attire.

The red-shirted, stogy-booted miner, and his more villainous *resemblee*, the professional ruffian; the well-dressed speculator or mine-owner; the flashily dressed exquisite (card sharp) and his prototype the sport, bullwhackers, prospectors, gamblers, and jockeys, in large numbers, with no two alike in feature, dress or expression.

Behind the counter stood Miss Nobby Nell, who, as the evening mail-stage had not yet arrived, was busying herself in weighing out groceries for a big bewhiskered miner, and making a very pretty picture in the light reflected from her well-cleaned lamps.

She had worn "the breeches" on her first appearance, and she wore them still, in conjunction with a dainty jacket, vest and spotless linen bosom, with a tie at the throat, jaunty.

broad-brimmed hat upon her head, and neat boots upon her feet, into the tops of which her loose trowsers were thrust.

Manly though was her attire, it well became her, and was not "loud" or flashy; it was really very *cute*.

In face and form, she was remarkably attractive. Her figure was below the medium height of women, a trifle, yet gracefully and symmetrically developed and rounded to a degree of perfection at once noticeable, owing to her neatly-fitting attire. Her face was fair and prettily chiseled, the features being faultless in their outline and charming in expression, especially the mouth, inclined to be the least bit large, but bewitchingly tempting, which the miners, to a man, voted was "too killing for anything."

And who shall say they were not right?

Her bright brown eyes always were aglow with the feeling of a warm, impulsive nature, yet betokened an independent spirit, that could be aroused to stern wrath. Her hair had some day been shorn close to her head, and now grew in a confusion of short auburn curls, infinitely becoming to her.

In fact, with her eighteen years of life left behind, Nobby Nell stood at the threshold of a glorious womanhood, without a peer as to beauty and powers of fascination, in the Wind River Mines.

Another attraction about her was the fact that she was "all on ther squar'," as the miners expressed it. From the time of her coming, she had manifested a sturdy will and disposition to guard and protect herself from insult, and it was said that at least a half-dozen precious pilgrims had "chawed plumbago," as a sequel to offering her insult.

Anyhow, while she was universally admired and respected above other unmarried women in the camp, even the boldest, or those upon friendliest terms with her, knew better than to crowd intimacy beyond a certain point, having no fancy for a voice from one of the polished six-shooters she ever wore in her belt.

Among those congregated within the post-office, to-night, were the better class of Placer City's citizens, with of course a sprinkling of the rougher and more adventurous element.

Lawyer Green was a center of attraction, of course, and in answer to innumerable inquiries, he related all about how General Hathaway's will had been made, as many innumerable times.

"So thet Colonel or Santa Fe Syd is goin' ter be heir, eh?" a miner observed—Jem Jinks, by the way, who held the important office of constable in the town. "Waal, Syd's one o' our own sort o' pards, an' durn my boots ef he ain't entitled ter hev ther shake. Don't you say so, Miss Nell?"

"On course I do!" Placer City's pretty postmistress averred, with a pretty nod of her curly head. "Santa Fe Syd's one of our citizens an' the Easterner ain't, which same one can tell by the cut of his coat!"

"That's so, by thunder!" the constable accepted. "He ain't no rough nugget, like Syd, nohow, an' I propose thet we assist ther boyee ther best we know how, ter git ther fortin'."

"Mebbe some one else will hev something ter

say about that," Lawyer Green observed, dryly. "Ther gal, Miss Miner, hez sumthin' ter say about thet."

"An' Santa Fe Syd he's soft on Nobby Nell, heer, an' dursen't go ag'in' her wishes, for fear o' gittin' planted, which quashes thet little indictment!" declared Black Eph, who was voted by all to be the ugliest rough customer in the mines, when the "snakes" were tickling the bottoms of his feet, which was not seldom.

"Hello! who lipped in for me, then?" the pretty postmistress demanded, looking up from the figuring-up of a bill of groceries. "Was that you what made thet remark, Black Eph?"

"I'll allow I'm the man," the border ruffian answered, emphatically and coolly. "I intimated thet, bein' tied ter yer skirts, Santa Fe Syd wouldn't durst take on no other craft, w'ich I opine is a complerment ter ye, right from ther shoulder."

"Well, look out you don't make too free wi' yer compliments," Nell replied, a little flush of indignation dyeing her fair cheek. "Mr. Sydney Atherton is in no way bound to me, nor have I any claim upon him whatever."

"On course she ain't, Black Eph," interposed Jem, who always took the verbal defense of the pretty postmistress. "Y'u're a leetle too free wi' yer chin-music o' late, an' need sum good chap ter dress ye out, you do."

"Mebbe you'd like ter take ther job?" the ruffian growled. "I've got an open date fer ary pilgrim as wants ter grab ther leetle persition of dressin'-maid."

But Jem shook his head, with a sad smile. Constable though he was of the town, he had no particular banking after rough-and-tumble scimmagers. For Black Eph held undisputed sway as the bully of the town, and was feared far more than he was respected, for a great many dark deeds had been laid at his door, and he was rough and revengeful at the least provocation.

Without, in the balmy moonlight night, was now heard the jolting rumble of stage-wheels, which cut short further argument, that might have resulted in bloodshed, for he was a poor stick who couldn't drop his man in a quarrel in the moral city of Buckskin Gulch.

Out into the street poured the inmates of the post-office, as the creaking stage rolled up, to add to the crowd already collected.

It was not an uncommon occurrence for a large delegation of new citizens to arrive in the "coffin-cage," as the stage had been affectionately christened, and these Placer City-ites were always on deck, ready to give the newcomers a critical inspection.

To-night, however, there were but four passengers; but four though there were they were most singularly contrasted.

The first was one of that class of Westerners easily distinguishad in their profession as cattle-drovers, by the fact of their constantly carrying a bull-whip—a young man in years, with a slight mustache, brown eyes, and long wavy hair that touched below his shoulders, while in face he was particularly good-looking, wearing a fearless and independent, yet genial expression.

He was attired in the usual costume of the

prairie cattle-drover, with a pair of serviceable revolvers stuck in his belt—slouch hat, knee-boots, and homespun, the woolen shirt which opened with a collar at the neck, being fancifully embroidered.

Young in years appeared this young drover, yet the "grip" of his eagle eye betrayed the fact that he was no coward in a big crowd, and the way he pushed through the assemblage of citizens into the post-office, was a guarantee that he was in the habit of going whither he pleased, regardless of hindrance. The other passengers who followed him, were a Chinaman, and a man and woman of the most striking appearance—the man being every inch a six-footer, if not taller, and one of the lankest, most gaunt-looking specimens of humanity that it had ever been the fortune of these Placer City-ites to behold.

Evidently there was not a spare pound of flesh in his composition, his skin appearing to be drawn tightly over the bones, and the loosely fitting garments he wore over the skin. His features were gaunt and sunken, his eyes large and of a yellowish shade, while his mouth and feet were extremely large. His head was totally bald, and as shiny as the appearance of a full moon, not even so much as a few hairs vegetating there.

Upon his face a sickly stubble of hirsute covering had collected—that was all.

His attire was ridiculously ragged and dirty, with worn-out shoes upon his feet, and a clown-shaped hat upon his head.

His companion was precisely his opposite, in appearance.

She was a coarse-featured, red-faced woman of four feet six, and nearly as big around as she was tall: a person, who, at the least calculation, must have weighed three hundred pounds. She was dressed in a stylish traveling costume of costly silk, and, as compared with the "skinny" man, to whose arm she clung tightly as if afraid that the stiff mountain breeze would blow him away, she was a remarkable contrast.

The Chinaman, a flat-visaged, almond-eyed, greasily-attired pig-tail, was evidently attached either to the drover or to the two extremes.

CHAPTER VII.

WYOMING WALT ENTERS THE ARENA.

BEING the first son of Confucius who had ever set foot in Placer City, he was naturally regarded with anything but welcome glances—for where is the miner, old or young, from Washington Territory down to the Gulf, who bears any particular affection for the average Celestial?

Evident it was that this precise pig-tail was the forerunner of more that were to follow, and a murmur of disgust and demur went the rounds of the crowd.

"A gol-durned Chinerman!" grunted one miner. "I say, boys, who imported 'im 'ere? We doan't want none o' thet breed."

"On course we doan't," assented several others, in a voice. "Wages is low enuff, as it is, wi'out any of them p'izen cusses."

"Hurra! that's ther talk!" chipped in Black Eph, who now formed one of the crowd that

had partially surrounded the Celestial. "Say, see hyar, you John Chinaman, don't ye know you're invadin' a Paradise thet warn't nevyer intended fer pig-tails, an' sech like? You've got to bounce."

"Nixy! Chee Fee Ching-go no bouncee. 'Melican man no makee Chee Fee Ching-go bouncee!' the son of Confucius declared, independently. "'Melica free land—Chineeman he heapee likee 'Melica—go wheree pleasee."

"Waal, I'll be cussed ef we won't jest erbout see ter thet, ye durned almond-eyed, flat-snooted sucker!" Black Eph cried savagely. And he sprung forward and seized the unoffending Chee Fee Ching-go by the collar, and yanked him around unmercifully. "Bring a rope, boyees, an' we'll hev er leetle pick-nick, jest as nice as ye please, all by ther light o' ther moon."

A dozen miners hurried away in quest of the desired halter, for it was down in their rough code that a Chinaman was not fit for anything else but to hang.

The young herder had heard the disturbance, and now came out of the post-office to learn the cause.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, as his flashing eyes took in the scene. "What's the matter? What are you a-goin' to do wi' thet Chinaman, old man?"

"Hang 'im, by thunder!" Black Eph chuckled. "Mebbe you've got some lip to chip in ag'in' it?"

"Mebbe I have," the herder declared coolly. "I generally mix in my gab, when I see fit. What's the Celestial bin doin', that ye want to send him up?"

"Nothin'—positively and precisely nothin'," Black Eph replied, with a leer. "So what are you going to do about it, my young gobbler?"

"I'm going ter persuade you to abandon all notion o' stringin' up the Chinaman, I opine!" the young herder replied, quickly whipping a pair of revolvers from his belt and cocking them. "Take your hands off from that Chinaman, and let him go, or I'll put a semi-colon right between your eyes quicker than a kitten can say its catechisms!"

"Cuss ye, d'ye mean it, you young popinjay?" the ruffian demanded fiercely.

"I don't mean nothing else," was the reply. "The Celestial hasn't harmed any one, and don't deserve to be hung, or even molested. This is a free country, and everybody has a right to go where they please, except when the law interferes, and therefore you've no business to lay a hand on that fellow."

A murmur of disapproval came from the crowd. It was not to their liking, this interference.

The young cattle-drover still stood with his revolvers leveled in a way that seemed to indicate that Black Eph's prospects for a funeral were large, unless he speedily obeyed.

"See hyar, young feller, this ain't no fair shake," he growled, uneasily. "I'll allow ye've got ther drop, but I want to argy ther p'int, in ther behalf o' our citerzens, to whom I'm a representative. Et's an established fact that ther cussed Chinamen hev did more to'rd fetchin' down wages than ary other race on ther earth, an' et ain't nateral fer us laborin' class ter love

'em for it, overmuch. Up ter date, we've kept our town free from ther pesky devils, an' I'll be cuss blamed ef we aire a-goin' ter let 'em swarm in an' cut us out o' our jobs. Ain't this so, boys?"

A grunt of assent from the miners, was the answer.

"On course et's so!" Black Eph averred, warming up, in an oratorical way, to the subject. "We ken't be blamed fer pertectin' our mutual interests, an' w'en a pig-tail galoot cums a-waltzin' inter our town—which same be a foretaste o' more thet's ter cum—I opine et's our moral an' religyus duty ter treat ther cuss ter a private hempen celebration, an' thereby encourage ther rope manufacturin' interests o' ther land. Hain't et so, boyees—hain't thet logick right from ther foundation? On course et is, an' ev'ry mother's son o' ye in favor o' givin' ther pig-tail a boost, will make manifest by sayin' I!"

"I!" was the ringing response, from many a throat, "I!"

"Contrary no!" cried the young herder. "If you are all in favor of hanging this Chinaman, *I am not*, and I'll drop the first man who attempts to boost him! That's me, Wyoming Walt, right down from ther cattle regions, and chock full o' pure beef an' blood, in the bargain. Remember! I give you fair warning. The first man who offers to invest in this lottery, will get a grand prize of a two-by-six pine box, providing the town authorities sees fit to supply it."

The crowd were waiting on Black Eph, for the decision, for one and all had long known him as a lawless leader in scrapes of this sort.

The ruffian knew that he was left judge, and glared around him, as if in doubt what to do.

"Waal, boys, ye'll hev ter give me a minute ter decide ther case," he said, "but ye kin draw yer pop-guns, so thet ther cowboy don't get too frisky."

"Stop!" Wyoming Walt yelled, sharply and quickly, a stern ring to his voice. "I'll blow the skull off of the galoot that draws a pistol!"

"And so will I!"

All eyes were turned toward the door of the post-office at the sound of the ringing voice, and all eyes beheld Nobby Nell, the pretty post-mistress, standing there, a pair of silver-mounted revolvers in her hands, leveled at the crowd.

"Oh! it's me!" she observed, "and I guess I'm pretty generally known. I just remarked 'And so will I,' the translation of which means I'll blow the head off of the pilgrim who offers to harm the pig-tail or the herder!"

"Boyees, et's 'Our Gal,' w'ot speaks," said Jim Byles, stepping forward. "Be we a-goin' ter hang by the luv we've allus hed fer Nobby Nell, or be we goin' ter hang ther pig-tail? W'ich?"

"Hang ther pig-tail," growled Black Eph, fiercely. "Nobby Nell don't run this yere town, ner she ain't got ther say in this matter."

"Ther gal is trump!" a half-dozen different miners replied. "What she says we'll make our law. Ef she says don't hang ther Chinaman, so be it!"

"Well, I do say it and I mean it," Nobby Nell replied, decidedly. "The young stranger

is right. You citizens an' landmarks of Placer City haven't no more right to lay hands on the Celestial than Solid Sam has to rob the stage. Let ther pig-tail go, boys, an' you'll sleep better fer not hangin' him to-night."

The words seemed to have an immediate effect, for the men mostly restored their weapons to their belts, and Chee Fee Ching-go was permitted to go his way.

The cattle-herder, Wyoming Walt, then turned back into the post-office, from which he had emerged on hearing the disturbance, and came face to face with Nobby Nell, who had evidently been waiting for him, as she was not behind the counter.

"See here," she said, motioning him aside from the immediate hearing of any chance bystanders. "Maybe it isn't any of my business, but I'd like to know your name, if you have no objections."

"None at all," the young herder replied, pleasantly. "I gave my handle to the crowd as Wyoming Walt—I'll give it to you in the same fashion."

"But, that is only an assumed name."

"How do you know that, pray?"

"Because I guessed so. There is a young cattle-drover named Wyoming Walt, but you are not him?"

"How do you know that, pray?" was the rejoinder, interrogatively.

"Because I have seen this Wyoming Walt, and he is not at all like you—is cowardly, and ruffianly, and ugly-looking, while you are quite the reverse," Nobby Nell said, gazing at him, unflinchingly.

"Oh! as to that, there could easily be two persons by the same name, in such an extensive Territory as Wyoming," the young herder replied. "Indeed, I know of a good many persons who go under one *nom de plume*."

"But you are *not* Wyoming Walt," Placer City's pretty young postmistress persisted, with a smile. "It is not likely there would be two by that peculiar name. You are some one else, who have hit upon the expedient of disguising yourself. Tell me, is this not so?"

"Possibly! Everything you know is possible, nowadays. But, whether I am the person I claim to be, or not, what does it matter to you?"

"Well, I'll tell you. My name is Nobby Nell, or Nell Nugent, for short, and I am a great admirer of bravery. You showed good grit, a bit ago, but it occurred to me that you were some one else than Wyoming Walt, and were running a great risk in coming here."

"Thanks for your kind anxiety in my behalf, but I am not at all in danger I opine, and were I, it does not matter so much. You are the postmistress, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Isn't there a letter here, for Wyoming Walt?"

"No, but there is one for Solid Sam," and Miss Nell lowered her voice as she spoke.

"Oh, there is?" Wyoming Walt said, without any apparent interest. "A friend of yours, I dare say?"

"No; I am not acquainted with him, but nevertheless admire his grit, and approve of his

cause. But here comes the mail, and I must change it."

The coach-driver now entered, burdened with a well-filled mail-bag.

And that very fact caused many a miner's eyes to sparkle with anticipations of the reception of letters from home.

Nobby Nell nodded to Wyoming Walt pleasantly, and then vaulting lightly over the counter, she received the mail-bag and disappeared behind the partition.

A faint gleam of admiration entered Wyoming Walt's eyes, as he watched her leave.

"She's as sharp as a razor, literally speaking," he muttered, under his breath. "She is pretty, too, and of a lovable nature, I allow. I wonder who were her parent, and what are her antecedents?"

Quick of sight and quick of touch, it did not take Nobby Nell long to assort her mail.

No boxes did Placer City's postal system boast of, but behind the partition Nell had constructed a sort of trough, containing twenty-six compartments numbered alphabetically, so that A's mail was put into Division A, and so on, which enabled her to know just where to look for each party's mail without trouble.

The little wicket-door soon flew open, and a crowd surged forward to receive their installment of letters and papers.

Many were the recipients of both, but some there were who received none, as was easy to tell by the gloomy expression upon their faces.

Then there was another class who inquired at the delivery as regularly as the mails arrived, who had no idea or hope of receiving even as much as a postal card. No friends or relatives had they who cared enough about their welfare to inquire about it, and their main reason for asking for mail seemed to be because they wished to hear Nobby Nell's pleasant, musical "No,"—terse, but a treat when vouchsafed by Miss Nell.

More out of curiosity than anything else, probably, Wyoming Walt joined in the line of inquirers, and when it came his turn, put forth his call, and to his surprise a letter was placed in his hand.

Not glancing at it, he stepped from the line, and allowed the next man to take his place, who chanced to be the bullying ruffian of the town, Black Eph, upon whose face there was suddenly seen a strange, triumphant leer.

Stepping to one side, Wyoming Walt glanced at the direction upon the envelope of his letter, and gave a surprised start.

It was addressed to "Solid Sam—the Boy Road-Agent," in a bold, graceful style of chirography.

A faint scowl of annoyance rose to the herder's brow, and he glanced sharply around to see if any one besides himself had seen the directions. As he did so he caught the leering gaze of Black Eph, and at once decided that he, if no one else, had seen them.

But, with a coolness that evidently came natural to him, he tore open the letter and glanced over it, his senses, however, so much on the alert, that he was well aware of what was going on around him.

He was also aware that the ruffian was approaching him, and accordingly, without apparent design, he put the letter into his pocket just as Black Eph came within arm's reach.

"Hello! got a letter, did ye?" the bully demanded, pausing, with a cunning grin.

"Well, what if I did?" Wyoming Walt replied. "Any one got a better right, I should like to know?"

"Luk out, ye young bantam; don't go to sassin' me, or I'll suddenly chaw ye up, I will. Let's see yer letter."

"Well, I guess not," the herder declined, coolly. "What for?"

"'Ca'se I want to see it, that's all," Eph answered, blusteringly. "Cum, pass et erlong, will ye, or shell I take it away frum ye?"

"Maybe you'd better try to take it away, if you imagine it would be healthy amusement for you!" was the calm suggestion, and the young man folded his arms complacently across his breast.

"Oh! ye defy me, do ye?" the ruffian growled. "Ho, ho! maybe I hold the game card jest about now. I see'd ther directions uv thet leetle billet-ducks, I did. What d'ye say to that?"

"Nothing of particular moment. The letter was given me through mistake, evidently, and not meant for me."

"Oho! thet won't work, me boy. I know all about et. Jest let me see thet 'ar epistel, or I'll tell who ye aire, an' then thar'll be fun!"

"You will?"

"Bet yer stogiest boots I will!"

"What'll you make by it?"

"I'll make you fill ther same noose ye got ther Chinaman's neck out of, cuss ye!"

"You will?"

"May I be shot fer a pigeon, ef I don't!"

"Then, go ahead! I defy you to do your very worst!" was the young herder's answer.

With an oath, Black Eph stepped back a few paces, and pointing his finger at Wyoming Walt, he cried, in a loud voice:

"Boyees, we've got 'im, now! That feller's *Solid Sam, the road-agent!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

SOLID SAM STEPS OUT—FREE ADVERTISING.

THE effect of the ruffian's words was magical.

Out came a great number of revolvers from different belts, to be grasped by sturdy hands, and the miners and citizens and adventurers who filled the room advanced a step, with dark scowls, that were threatening in the extreme.

"Yas, sir-ee! that feller's Solid Sam, an' I know it!" Black Eph declared, with triumph. "I smelt a durned big rat, did I, ther furst minnit I see'd him, an' so when he went up yander ter ther mail delivery, I peeped over his shoulder, and see'd him get a letter addressed ter 'Solid Sam.'"

"Is this so, young man?" asked Bill Bolivar, who aspired to be Mayor of Placer City some day, should the place ever attain sufficient dimensions to need a mayor. "Is Eph a-tellin' the truth erbout this yere letter?"

"He is, undoubtedly," Wyoming Walt replied, not at all disconcerted, still standing facing the scowling crowd, his arms folded across

his breast. "I received such a letter from the post-office, but it evidently was handed me through mistake."

"Oh! no it wassent!" Black Eph chuckled. "Nobby Nell she knows her biz, you bet, an' she wouldn't be apt ter make a mistake like that."

"Of course she wouldn't." Bolivar agreed. "an' so, Mr. Road-agent, you may as well surrender, ter oncet. Thar's fifty on us ter one o' you, an' escape is impossible."

"It is, eh?" the young herder cried. "Then you are perfectly well satisfied that I am the genuine Solid Sam Hathaway?"

"We are," Bolivar assented. "All the difference 'twixt ye is thet ye hain't got no black streak across yer brow."

"Which ought to be conclusive evidence that I am not Solid Sam," was the calm reply, a faint expression of amusement lurking about his mouth. "If, however, you will have it that I am the notorious outlaw, I do not see in what way I can help it."

"What's the matter here?" Nobby Nell demanded, emerging behind the counter from back of the postal partition. "Ah! are they trying to get you into trouble again, stranger?"

"It would seem so," Wyoming Walt replied. "You gave me a letter through mistake, evidently, which was addressed to Solid Sam, the road-agent, and this man they call Black Eph saw it, and now accuses me of being the party himself!"

"And so they propose to introduce you to Judge Lynch, eh?"

"That's about the size of it, I reckon," was Wyoming Walt's response.

"Well, if I can help it, they won't. Gentlemen, you've made a mistake here, I allow," the pretty postmistress said. "This pilgrim, Wyoming Walt, is a herder from up in the cattle regions. Solid Sam, indeed! Why, Solid Sam hes got a scar across his brow, an' this pilgrim ain't."

"See hyar, Nobby Nell, nobody axed you fer yer lip-in, in this case. Ef you're a pardner ter this galoot, that ye back his case so strong, why, we'll boost you too, mebbel!" Black Eph snarled, savagely. "I've been in Wyoming Territory fer a dorg's age, an' never heerd o' sech a chap as Wyoming Walt, afore. Ef he ain't Solid Sam, why in blazes did ye give him the letter?"

"The letter has been lying here in the office for several days, and so I thought I'd give it to some one in order ter git rid of it, and Wyoming Walt happened to be the one that got it. I didn't 'spect any such harm as this or I shouldn't have let i go out of the office. That's what's about ther letter, old man!"

"But mebbe we won't take yer word fer thet!" Black Eph replied. "I opine you've hed yer way, hyar in Placer City, about long enough, an' et's time we hed a change. This galoot's Solid Sam, an' we're goin' ter hang him. What d'ye say, boys?"

"We say yes, on course, ef he's really Solid Sam," Bill Bolivar proclaimed. "But, Nobby Nell orter know, mebbe, for she knows 'most everybody."

"Gentlemen!" Wyoming Walt cried, "you needn't argue the case any longer. Miss Nobby

Nell evidently made a mistake in giving me the letter, and believes me to be Wyoming Walt. Nevertheless, she is mistaken, for I am the very individual you have been trying to make me out ---Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent!"

A murmur of astonishment escaped the crowd, for this was certainly startling information, boldly delivered. Even though many had at first believed him to be the notorious young outlaw, they had hardly been expecting his bold declaration of the fact.

Coolly stood he there, after vouchsafing the fact, with arms folded across his breast, and his eyes flashing a dangerous light.

"Yes, I am Solid Sam," he repeated, "the road-agent of Buckskin Canyon, the boy whom you drove out of this gulch six years ago. Do you wonder I am forced to take matters into my own hands, gentlemen, when you look around you and realize how much you are usurping my rights?"

"We ain't usurpin' nothin'," Black Eph growled.

"You lie, you are!" Solid Sam declared, undauntedly. "All this gulch had been staked off, and rightfully secured by John Vance, alias White Beard, previous to the time when a party of invaders, you included, came into the gulch, killed my grandfather, and drove my grandmother and myself away from our home. We both swore then that not much of our rightful gold should ever leave the canyon, and I allow there hasn't much left."

"Oho! ye brag o' yer robberies, do ye?" Black Eph shouted. "Waal, ye may's well play game while your courage is up, fer we're goin' ter boost ye to glory, d'rectly. Cum, ye may's well surrender, and save us ther pleasure o' salivatin' ye!"

"I rather reckon not," Solid Sam retorted, coolly. "Nor will you make the least attempt to take me. While you were intent upon catching your game, you were being captured yourselves. Ha! ha! if you look at the windows, my loving pilgrims, you will undoubtedly see what I mean."

They did look with a start of surprise, and what they saw, carried significant weight to the words of the Boy Road-Agent.

Three windows there were upon each side of the building, looking into the store-room, and through these were leveled a glittering array of rifle-barrels, some score or more in number, in such a shape that nearly every person in the room was covered.

A murmur of rage went the rounds, while Solid Sam laughed, tauntingly.

"You see how it is, boys!" he said, smilingly.

"My hand happens to be 'flush,' and I take the game. Ha! ha! I am sorry to rob you of your anticipated pleasure of hanging me, but I'm not ready to cross over the river yet, which makes the difference. You see you are covered, and of course you will be wise. You will make no attempt to hinder my departure, for each of the rifles you now see gazing at you, is manned by a Branded Brow, who will shoot the first man who offers to raise a murmur of dissent. Sorry to have to tear myself away from your affectionate society, but, such is nevertheless the case, and so I bid you all a pleasant adieu!"

Make way to the door, please, and don't stir from your tracks to follow me, under penalty of instant death!"

He was obeyed.

Loth, though these citizens of Placer City were, to let him escape, who had abstracted so much from their pecuniary possessions, they were in no way desirous of losing their wind, as they were liable to do, if they offered to prevent his departure.

Therefore, a passageway was cleared to the door, with grim scowls, and Solid Sam walked through it with as much indifference as though he were a monarch marching through a body-guard of his admirers.

When he reached the door, he turned and raised his hat triumphantly, a pleasant smile upon his face; then turning, he quickly left the office.

At the same instant the rifles were withdrawn from the windows, and when those within the post-office gained the open air, nothing was to be seen either of Solid Sam or his Branded Brows.

Had the earth opened up and swallowed them?

On the following morning, Placer City's daily newspaper contained a "boom" in news, and had a ready sale.

Among its local items of interest were the appended, which the editor had evidently labored hard to present to his patrons:

"SOLID SAM AGAIN.—The notorious Boy Road-Agent, Solid Sam, again came to light last night, but as usual made his escape, not to the credit of our citizens. This young outlaw is constantly growing bolder and bolder, and some certain measures should be taken for his eradication. If our citizens—all of them hardened and manly nuggets of the old school—cannot effectually put a stop to the fellow's wild, lawless career, why not send to New York for Captain Williams, the champion clubber of the 'finest police in the world?' He probably could fix our youthful road-agent."

"It is hinted by some, that Solid Sam is aided and abetted by the strange old hag, Wild Meg, who is credited with being possessed of witchcraft, also that there is danger to every citizen of our town, from this unnatural pair. It seems that, in the first history of this town, the hag and her husband, together with the boy, lived here, but were driven away by the settlers. The man was killed for refusing to go, claiming that he and his wife owned this canyon by right of actual compliance with the rules of the Government. Whether this be true or not, the Witch and the young road-agent still claim to be the owners of the canyon, and give this as their reason for their constant depredations upon our citizens. Prompt measures should be taken for the early 'planting' of this precious yet dangerous crop of human thistles."

In another place was:

"The funeral of our esteemed citizen, General Hathaway, of whose assassination by the Witch, we spoke in yesterday's issue, occurred before day-break this morning, as his early decomposition rendered quick interment necessary. But a certain few were present to witness the last sad rites."

In still another place, was another item:

"It appears, according to a statement made by our eminent barrister, Lawyer Green, that Solid Sam, the road-agent, is the son, by a first marriage of the deceased General Hathaway, and consequently the *rightful* or legal heir to the deceased's wealth."

The lawyer tells a singular story which he claims the general confessed to him, before he breathed his last, and as the lawyer is a man noted for his veracity, we are in duty bound to believe him, although the story seems incredible, and we refrain from publishing it. In case, however, that it is true, lively times are impending, for Solid Sam is not remembered in the general's will. The will is as follows: If our townsman, Syd Atherton, can effect an amicable matrimonial alliance with Miss Miner, the general's pretty step-daughter, the property goes to him and her, jointly. If not, in case the same arrangement can be effected between Miss Miner and Colonel Carrol, the general's brother, the property goes to them, respectively and equally. If neither of these alliances can be effected, the whole wealth, of which Atherton is trustee, is to be handed over to our pretty postmistress, Nobby Nell Nugent. It is a novel case in the extreme, and its settlement suggests a fair chance for six-shooters and gunpowder."

The reading of these extracts caused quite a sensation among all conditions of Placer City's citizenship.

It did look, indeed, as if there was a big chance for a grand struggle, and the matter was discussed by every man and woman in the town.

Colonel Hathaway and Santa Fe Syd were chief centers of notice, but neither spoke to the other, and both were rather quiet.

Several days passed by—days of feverish anticipation to the gossip-mongers and excitement lovers of the town, who were eagerly awaiting developments that did not come.

Nothing had been seen or heard from Solid Sam since his escape from the post-office; nevertheless he was expected to be heard from, again, at any moment.

The notice he had received in the newspaper had but served to increase his notoriety, and also the dread of him that was generally prevalent, and those who had any quantity of golden treasure in the town, held fast to it, hardly daring to risk sending it out of the gulch, for fear it would fall into the hands of the watchful young outlaw.

One stormy, windy night, about a week later, the publisher of the daily paper, while sitting in his sanctum, received a caller.

No unusual occurrence was it for some pilgrim to drop in, for the purpose of soliciting a puff, or to examine the latest papers and smoke the editor's pipe; and, therefore, the aforesaid editor, a lean, hungry-looking man, did not look up from his writing, until the cold contact of something hard was pressed against his temple, sending a shiver down his sensitive spine, and he made the horrifying discovery that the muzzle of a formidable six-shooter was indeed threatening his head, held in the unwavering gripe of an individual of some eighteen years, across whose brow was a black streak, as if painted there by a searing instrument.

No man of mighty courage was this weak representative of the newspaper fraternity, whose name was Bloffs; indeed, he had a mortal terror of warlike instruments, and the fact that one of these dangerous tools was pressed against his head caused him literally to wilt in his chair, and tremble all over.

"Heavens! don't—don't kill me!" he gasped,

his teeth chattering. "I beg—don't shoot! W—who are you?"

"Well, my Christian friend, I happen to be that notorious 'thistle' you deem easy to remove from this moral sphere," was the response. "Otherwise I'm Solid Sam, and I mean bizness!"

CHAPTER IX.

MAY AND SANTA FE SYD—SOLID SAM'S POSTERS.

ABOUT this same minute, when the Boy Road-Agent had the newspaper man covered with his revolver, Santa Fe Syd left the post-office, equipped with an armful of groceries, and hurried down the street, through the wind and rain toward his bachelor's shanty abode.

It was a wild night in the extreme, with a fierce gale blowing down over the mountains, driving before it a continuous sheet of rain, and there were but few persons abroad on the main street of the little mining-camp. Yet when in the neighborhood of his shanty, the handsome mine-owner met a cloaked female figure, whom the strong wind was seemingly trying to prevent from going up the street. A second glance discovered who it was.

"Why, can it be possible that is you, Miss Miner?" he exclaimed, crossing over to her. "What in the world ever brought you out in the storm—or isn't it any of my business?"

"Yes, it's your business, for you are the person I started forth to find," was the gasping reply, for the huge rain-drops beat tattoo in the maiden's pretty face. "I had no idea it stormed so."

"It's a wild night," Syd replied. "But come—you must get in out of the storm. Yonder is my shanty, if you will accept of its friendly shelter."

"Until I have had a short talk with you, yes," and Miss Miner timidly took the stalwart gold-digger's arm, until they were safely at the shanty, and she was seated by a cosy fire.

"It's a rough night—the roughest I've seen for some years," Santa Fe Syd said, as he deposited his purchases upon a table, which formed one of the appointments of a neat room. "Something of unusual moment, I take it, must have occurred, to bring you out in such a storm, Miss Miner?"

"No. I only came to talk with you concerning the will of General Hathaway and other matters, sir," was the answer. "But, first, I want to know if the woman I have been led to suppose was my mother, is my mother?"

The mine-owner looked surprised.

"Why, do you come to me to ask this?" he demanded, turning upon her with a searching glance.

"Because I know that you know something about me!" May replied, firmly. "The glances exchanged between you and Mrs. Hathaway, on your meeting, did not escape me, and then, she has often hinted to me that I was nothing to her. Tell me, Mr. Atherton, I beg of you, if I am in any way related to that woman? You know—you can tell me that which I most want to know—who I am!"

Santa Fe Syd paced a turn about the room, before he answered.

"Do you have any recollection of a former life?" he finally asked, stopping before her.

"Does your memory date back to—say twelve years ago?"

"No. I cannot remember back as far as that. I remember when I was eight years of age, I lived with the woman I now call mother, and that one day when I played truant, she threw me upon the floor, and pounded me so badly that I was sick a great while, and in under the care of a doctor. Further back than this all seems to be a blank to me. Yet I have sometimes thought that I have seen your face, a good while ago, for it is singularly familiar in feature. Where or when, I have no idea, but yet I am almost positive that I have seen it."

"It is not impossible," the miner said, slowly, gazing at the blaze upon the hearth. "But, before I answer any of the questions, I want to ask you a few. What do you think of General Hathaway's will?"

"I think it is the strangest affair I have ever heard of. Did you read the piece in the newspaper about another who is a *rightful* heir?"

"Yes, and believe it. The Boy Road-Agent, as he is called, has borne the name of Solid Sam Hathaway ever since I knew anything about him, and I have often heard General Hathaway speak of him in a bitter way that caused me to believe that he knew something more about him than he pretended. Lawyer Green claims that the general sent for him, just before he died, and made a confession of his sins, and owned that Solid Sam was his only lawful son, but the will being made, he refused to change it. He told Green that it was his strongest hope that you and I could form an alliance as man and wife, and thus inherit the money, according to the stipulations of his will. Of course, I have no designs upon his property, being in my own right moderately wealthy, and would of a choice wish myself well clear of the whole matter. Still, I am heart and hand free, and may marry when I find some person I dearly care for. I do not believe you would care to bind yourself to a person for life whom you have never known or even had reason to give a moment's consideration."

"No, I should not. But there seems for me only two choices. Either I must marry you, and get the fortune in that way, or I must marry the colonel, which I would rather be a beggar for life than do."

"Why, must you marry him if you do not choose?" the miner demanded, with flashing eyes.

"They would make me. Oh, sir, you do not know them—the colonel and Mrs. Hathaway. They only came here intent upon getting possession of the general's property, and if the Witch had not taken his life, I candidly believe that they would have done so. And now, they have tried to persuade me to wed the colonel, and when I refused, have threatened violence."

"If this is true, they'll find me on deck and to the front, and don't you forget it! The woman is not your mother, miss, nor is she in any way related to you. Years ago, when you were a seven-year-old child, I gave you over into the hands of that woman, who was then my bride—unfortunately so, perhaps, for I only lived with her a short three months when she deserted me

and fled to Chicago, where I found her, on giving chase, in company with this man, Colonel Carrol Hathaway.

"I immediately applied for and received an absolute divorce, and also tried to get you from her, but as I had given you to her, lawfully, I could not take you from her. Making her first promise to treat you well, I then left for this part of the country, and never have seen either of you since, until you came here to Placer City."

"Thank Heaven she is nothing to me!" the girl said, fervently. "But still, you have not told me who I am—whose child I was, before I was given into her care."

"No, and cannot, just now, for I do not even know myself. I will make efforts to find out, however, and report at another time."

"Very well. What information you have vouchsafed to me is of greatest value to me, and I will be content to let you use your own judgment as to when to answer me the rest. But, there is another thing to settle ere I go. What is to be done in regard to the will?"

"There is no hurry to decide that. Let it go awhile; in the mean time utterly refuse all proposals on the part of Carrol Hathaway and the other, keeping me posted occasionally as to their conduct. If they go to showing too much of the cloven hoof, I will soon dispossess them of shelter, for the shanty belongs to me."

"Then you have the upper hand, eh? Well, I am glad of it. But I must now be going, as the storm has somewhat abated."

It had not entirely ceased raining, but Santa Fe Syd produced an umbrella, and accompanied her to the door of the Hathaway shanty, where he bade her adieu, and turned his steps back toward his own humble habitation.

No one with an eye to business could have doubted, by the way he spoke, that Solid Sam did mean just what he said, and even the frightened editor had no doubts upon the subject.

Wild stories of the bold deeds of the handsome young outlaw had caused many a shiver to touch his spine, even as he wrote of said deeds for the edification of the readers of his paper, and, now that he was literally a prisoner of the notorious boy, he felt that he could almost hear the carpenters driving the nails into his coffin.

"Yes, I am Solid Sam, and I mean business," the chief of the Branded Brows said, significantly. "Ye needn't be skeared, however, old honeysuckle, for I don't intend to swallow you whole unless you give me due offense, and then it's hard tellin' what I won't do. They say I'm awfully bad when I ain't obeyed. By the way, I suppose you're the proprietor and prime factor of this roost, ain't ye?"

"I am, sir—Timothy Bloffs by name, ye see," the editor declared, with a trifle more of assurance.

"Karect. You're the precise man I want to see, then. I want you to dust around lively, now, and print me half a dozen posters quick—erin' a cat ever swallowed a mouse. D'ye hear?"

"Yes! yes! I hear. I can get you out some

very fine poster-work at very short notice for ten dollars a hundred, cash in advance—warranted to give satisfaction."

"But I am not going to pay you a cent for it," Solid Sam assured, with a laugh. "I own this hyar gulch, and everything in it, having never received any rent, and consequently I don't pay for any little jobs I may want done. So just you climb fer yer stick lively, and set up ther form, or I'll make your ideas scarcer than the teeth in a Centennial mule."

"Don't shoot! don't shoot," Bloffs protested. "I'll do just as you say, if you only don't shoot me."

"Well, get to your work, then. Haul out your biggest type, and form a head-line of 'Notice.'"

With perceptibly trembling limbs, Bloffs left his chair to do as requested, and Solid Sam seated himself and lit a cigar, not forgetting, however, to keep the lean publisher covered.

Soon the type "form" was begun, headed in big letters by the word "notice."

"So far, so good," Solid Sam said. "Now, if you please, set the form after this copy," and he laid a piece of paper upon the table.

Bloffs obeyed with alacrity. No desire had he to get the contents of the young road-agent's revolvers, and consequently worked away as earnestly as though big money was in the job.

Long into the wee small hours of the night was it ere Solid Sam left the office, armed with an armful of posters, and took his way boldly through the now deserted streets of the infant metropolis pitched down in the depths of Buckskin Canyon.

On the following morning, when the natives crawled out, each and every one experienced a thrill of alarm, for, pasted conspicuously to the fronts and sides of various buildings, was the following:

"NOTICE!"

"TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:—

"Know ye, one and all of ye, who do reside within that mountain inclosed gulch, known as Buckskin Canyon, that I, Sam Hathaway, sole heir and owner to said canyon, do hereby warn ye to raise a sum of one hundred thousand dollars in currency, and place it at my disposal, being the purchase money of the deed, which I will promptly hand over on the receipt of said money. In case said sum of money is not placed at my disposal, within the next ten days after the appearance of this notice, I swear to cause the certain destruction of the town as it now stands, and turn the inhabitants from their abodes, without any shelter, whatever. This is final, and I shall keep my promise.

"Signed,

SOLID SAM HATHAWAY,
"The Boy Road-Agent."

That was all, but it set the ball of excitement once more in motion, with renewed vigor.

The two queer people who arrived on the stage the night of the disturbance at the post-office, were characters, in themselves.

Evidently neither were gifted with an extraordinary allowance of brains, and they were unconsciously the butt of much ridicule by the loafers and adventurers.

According to their own "tell," they were in no way related to each other.

The lean individual claimed to be Bill Romeo

Shakespeare, a modern poet, engaged upon some Eastern literary paper, and stated that the woman was a love-sick admirer of his poetical gems, who persisted in tagging after him, in hopes that he would make her his wife.

The woman's name was Juliet Clawhammer, she said, and also declared that "B. R. Shakespeare had promised to marry her, and she was 'a-goin' to make him do it, if forced to follow him to the ends of the earth."

These declarations on the part of the eccentric pair furnished a fund of amusement for the miners and usual street loungers, day after day, for the poet and his Juliet were here, there and everywhere.

Where went the poet, followed his feminine admirer; if he laughed, she laughed; if he smoked, she smoked; if he drank, she drank.

The lank man ever carried with him a bundle of manuscripts, and his chief aim seemed to be to dispose of them, at exorbitant figures.

On the night after Solid Sam had billed the town with his posters, Colonel Carrol Hathaway was among those who lounged in the post-office awaiting the arrival of the evening mail. But, instead of mingling freely among the different classes, which had been a popular characteristic of his brother, he held himself haughtily aloof, and busied himself in airily stroking his luxuriant side-whiskers.

It was while thus engaged that he felt a tap upon his shoulder, and turned to find standing in his presence, the lean, long, hungry-looking poet, Bill Romeo Shakespeare, whose companion, the faithful Juliet, was not far away, keeping an eye on the aforesaid poet, in a way that elicited a titter of amusement from the spectators.

"Well, what do you want?" the colonel demanded, gruffly, surveying the would-be master of the Muses, with displeasure.

"Ef ye please, capt'in, I've a little verse o' poetical logic to read you," the poet replied, with a bow.

CHAPTER X.

CORNERED.

AND from his pocket the second Shakespeare took a roll of writing paper and proceeded to untie it, a bland expression upon his strange face.

"Stop! You need not trouble yourself, for I do not want to see or hear any of your nonsense," the colonel replied, savagely. "I will not be bored!"

"Oh! I do not intend to bore you, as I have no auger handy," Bill Romeo replied, calmly. "Nor is the verse I would read you, nonsense. It is a grand masterpiece, equal to any of those old-time effusions, credited to the immortal bard. Just listen, I pray thee:

"From down behind the mighty hills
Where all mankind attains the chills,
A scoundrel came in guise of man,
Who leagued is with the devil's band;
A man of keen, designing mind,
A single ace—no two 'f a kind;
He flees from where the eastern sun
Along the morning's horizon run.
Close at his trail, a shadow tags,
Like a bloodhound on the trail of stags.
But, see! a cloud is on the sky,
Which signifies that I am dry!"

"Come! shall we go have something at your expense?"

The crowd tittered again.

The colonel bit his lip with rage. "Curse you! get out with your nonsense. I want none of your poetry, nor am I in the habit of drinking with lunatics!"

And with mighty dignity he turned and strode from the office.

Down the street he went, for several blocks; then paused abruptly and gazed back in the direction of the post-office.

"No, I am not blind," he muttered, a dangerous glitter to his eyes and hoarseness to his tone that betrayed his emotion. "There was a meaning for me in that rude composition—perhaps there is also a similar meaning in the fact of that cursed fellow's presence here. I must have another look at him."

He retraced his steps toward the post-office, a dark scowl upon his face.

Instead of entering he positioned himself at a window, and gazed eagerly within.

The poet was still there, attacking others with rehearsals of his compositions, the fat Juliet now keeping a close hold to his arm, seemingly with fear lest he should escape her, or get within speaking distance of the pretty postmistress, who was an amused looker-on.

For several minutes Colonel Hathaway watched the strange pair narrowly; then, with an oath, he left his position and walked rapidly to the Hathaway shanty, where he found the late general's wife seated in the sitting-room, engaged in perusing a novel.

"Where is May?" he demanded, as he laid his hat upon the table and bit the end from a fresh cigar. "Is she in her room yet?"

Mrs. Hathaway looked up with a vicious expression.

"Yes—under lock and key. She declared she will die before she will marry you; moreover, she claims to know that I am not her mother. Santa Fe Syd has been putting her up to this!"

"Undoubtedly," the colonel assented with a frown. "He is altogether too much mixed up in our affairs. Besides, something has got to be done!"

"How do you mean?"

"Oh! in various ways. If we hope to get a bite out of the money, we've got to make new and rapid calculations. I saw a couple of queer people in town, to-night, whom I am infernally suspicious of!"

Mrs. Hathaway's book dropped from her hand, and she grew suddenly pale.

"Is it possible? You are joking?" she gasped.

"Devilish poor plan it would be to joke about that," he growled. "I may be mistaken, but don't believe I am. One of the parties is a man—the other a woman, to all appearances. The man claims to be a poet, and attacks everybody that comes in his way, with an appeal for them to listen, and buy his mongrel composition."

A wild glitter took possession of Mrs. Hathaway's eyes, as she heard.

"I believe you are right. If so, there is urgent necessity for lively action. What do you propose?"

"I scarcely know. Can the girl not be persuaded to marry me?"

"No, I do not believe she can. She has plenty of grit in her composition, and I candidly think she would suffer death before she would marry you."

"Curse her. Providing that she is in possession of some of our secrets, as we have suspected, from time to time, she would be better dead than alive, anyhow!"

"No! no! Harm must not come to her—I promised Syd that!"

"Humph!" and the colonel sneered, fiercely. "Then you regard your promises to him, eh?"

"In this case, yes. Had I staid with him, I should to-day be the better for it. But, let that pass. Laying aside May, what other plan have you?"

"There is but a narrow path left. Either we must put Santa Fe out of the way, and take possession—or, we must make a raise of all we can, and skin out. It's our only chance of salvation, to leave this town behind us, as quickly as possible. Did the ruffian, Black Eph, come, to-night?"

"Yes, and I sent him into the kitchen to await your arrival."

"Then I must see him and consult with him. He is probably the very party I want."

Several days passed by.

Days of anxious suspense, they were, to the poorer class of the citizens of Placer City, who looked eagerly to the monopolist mine-owners to raise the one hundred thousand dollars demanded by Solid Sam, and thus save the town from an unknown peril.

But, no sign of any such a move was made among the wealthy ones, except in the case of Santa Fe Syd, who offered to donate one-tenth of the amount if others would come to the front with the other nine-tenths.

This they positively refused to do, believing that it was only a scare on the part of Solid Sam, and consequently putting no faith in the warning he had placed before their eyes.

The same night after the occurrence of the events last narrated, a muffled figure stole into the town from down Buckskin Canyon, when the golden camp was wrapped in slumber, and to the rear of the cabin used as the post-office building.

Here he paused, and cautiously removed his boots; after which he carefully fitted a key into the lock of the rear door, and in a moment it was open.

Stepping within the building, he found himself in the small apartment, sacred to the uses of the postal service.

There was a table on which were spread a number of letters and packages destined to go upon the morrow's mail; a lamp furnished a dim illumination, being turned down; in one corner, upon a rude couch, Nobby Nell had thrown herself at the conclusion of a weary day's labor, to seek rest in repose.

With a sharp glance at her, as if to assure himself that she was asleep, Solid Sam—for it was he—stole quietly to the table, and assorted the letters spread out upon it, with cool audacity.

Not finding any to his liking, evidently, he next proceeded to look over those in the delivery-trough where they had been placed, subject to the morrow's inquiry.

He was thus busily engaged when he felt a tap upon his shoulder, and turned to meet the unflinching gaze of a polished revolver muzzle—the same deadly instrument being held in the grasp of Miss Nobby Nell.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" the young outlaw interrogated, coolly, proceeding to assort the letters over with the greatest nonchalance. "I didn't know but some of Judge Lynch's pardners might have got the drop on me. Nice evening out of doors, isn't it?"

"Probably!" Nell retorted, tersely. "But, if you ever hope or expect to enjoy another one, you'd better keep your hands off from that mail. Come! who are you, and what do you want?"

"Oh! I'm Solid Sam, you see," and the night-hawk unbuttoned his huge cloak collar and raised his hat enough so that she could see his face, with its Branded Brow. "I had a desire to learn if these Placer Cityites have been attempting to smuggle any of my rightful property through the mails."

Nobby Nell lowered her revolver and restored it to her belt.

"No, they have not," she said. "Did you read that letter I gave you, when you were personating Wyoming Walt?"

"I did," the Boy Road-Agent replied. "It was from you, and stated that you had intercepted moneys that had been sent from here, in my behalf. For that I am sorry, as I want no person to sin for me."

"I did not sin," the girl said, with flashing eyes. "The money is all rightfully yours, and I don't think I did wrong in holding it for you."

"Nevertheless, I want you to forward it to its destination," Solid Sam returned. "I prefer to deduct my own toll, and if there is any future penalty to pay, I'll stand the blunt. Why, may I inquire, do you manifest so much interest in my behalf?"

"No, you need not ask, because I will not tell you. I like you—that is all I can explain," the young postmistress said, gazing confidently into his eyes. "Like myself, you seem to be a waif of the world, and perhaps this is the reason my interest has been aroused for you. Besides, I am ever a friend to the weakest side, and I allow that your side is right. If these mines belong to you, why, it's your right to have possession of them."

"That, I fear, I will never get, until Placer City is level to the ground to rise no more!" the young man replied, bitterly. "I've offered to surrender the deed to these miners, for a mere nominal figure, and if my order is not accepted, I will not be to blame if I wage a stronger and more effective warfare than I have done, heretofore. They can either purchase my friendship, and secure my retirement from road-agency—or they can gratuitously receive my enmity."

"Good. I admire you for your grit," Nobby Nell said, with an enthusiastic nod. "If you cannot deal fairly with them, you are not censurable for reversing things. At all events, count strongly on my friendship, for you can

have it free gratis, and if you ever want any of my assistance, don't be afraid to ask for it. By the way, it happens by chance that you and I are inclined to be rivals in this will business. You are the real heir—yet I've better prospects of winning than you!"

"So it would seem, unless the girl, May Miner marries either the man Atherton, or Colonel Hathaway,"

"She won't do either," Miss Nell declared, firmly. "Santa Fe Syd is not the man to marry his hand where his heart cannot go. And, as for the colonel, I do not believe the young lady could be hired to link her fate with his. He is a thoroughbred scoundrel, if I'm a judge of human nature, and the young lady appears to be a lady in every sense of the word."

"Perhaps!" Solid Sam replied, thoughtfully. "As for the fortune, my sire refused to give me even honorable mention, and I am out. I shall not interfere in the settlement of the case, until it is decided who is to have the gold—then, it is not unlikely that I shall put in a bill, for my share."

"Of course, and if I am lucky enough to get the heritage, you can have the lion's share of it, or the whole of it if you insist. When I take a notion to a person—"

"Sh!" Solid Sam whispered, with a start. "Listen!"

They did listen, and heard the faint murmur of human voices, outside the building.

"I'm cornered!" the young outlaw whispered. "I was impressed with a sense of danger, to-night, and once or twice thought I was followed, but could see no one. But, those voices tell the tale, there are Vigilantes outside waiting for me!"

Nobby Nell laid her soft white hand upon his shoulder, a strange, wild expression in her eyes.

"They shall not get you, if I can help it," she said, resolutely. "Stay here. I will see what the chances of escape are, in front."

Then she glided away, leaving Solid Sam to gaze curiously after her. She was an enigma to him—graceful, pretty, cool and voluble, and he already greatly admired her.

In three minutes she returned, with no sign of encouragement in her face.

"No show in that direction," she said, shaking her head. "The Vigilantes are thicker'n flies on a carcass, and more are coming. It looks pretty dubious for you now. Are any of your men in town?"

"Not to my knowledge. I left them at the stronghold, as I did not anticipate getting cornered. But I'll fix 'em!"

"Who—the Vigilantes?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll show you. You'd better get back to your bed and feign sleep; or, better still, I'll bind you, which will prevent your being suspected of being in league with me."

"Nixy! I won't do that. I don't care if they know I'm your friend—I ain't afraid to tell 'em so."

"But that would be foolish, as long as you have a chance to save yourself and your position. Besides, if it is your desire to aid me, you

can perhaps help me better as a silent friend than as an open one."

"Maybe you are right, and I'll do as you wish."

She accordingly once more laid down upon her couch, and permitted him to bind her hands and feet and tie a handkerchief over her mouth.

"The night is light as day, the moon shines so brightly, and I am going to set my carrier pigeon loose," he whispered, "then surrender, upon conditions."

He seated himself at a table, and hastily penciled a few lines; then taking the pigeon from his pocket, he fastened the note under his wing. A chimney hole in one side of the cabin served as a means of exit for the bird, which was soon sailing away through the moonlit night, toward the stronghold of the Branded Brows.

Then drawing and cocking his revolvers, Solid Sam approached the rear door and rapped upon it smartly.

CHAPTER XI.

SURRENDER.

IN the mean time, let us return to the shanty of the Hathaways.

Colonel Carrol hastened from the presence of Mrs. Hathaway, to the kitchen where he found the ruffian, Black Eph, seated, engaged in smoking a grimy pipe, and sampling a bottle of old wine, which latter he had found in a close.

He looked up with a nod, as the colonel entered, his eyes bloodshot from excess of drink.

"Well, I got yer card, an' so I cum," he said, as the Chicagoan seated himself. "Ye sed ye wanted ter engage me in bizness?"

"Exactly!" the colonel assented. "I want a man who is not afraid to do a nasty job, so long as there is a straight hundred dollars behind it."

"Then I am your huckleberry," the ruffian assured. "Where ther's cash, I'm allus ready. Hain't particular what ther job is, neither; an' w'at's more, I can allus be depended on ter work fer ther interests o' ther man w'at pays highest. Want me to give some galoot ther send-off?"

"Yes. You've hit it exactly. Now, first, I'll give you a few points of explanation, and the directions, afterward. - You see, by the will of my brother, his wife was almost totally ignored, and I, his brother, left with no hope of coming in for a share of his fortune, except I marry his step-daughter, which I do not find it convenient to do. This leaves the fortune to outside parties, and we, the rightful heirs, have come to the conclusion to make a struggle for our share. As there does not seem to be much of a chance for getting possession of it by fair means, I propose to resort to 'oul. To-morrow night, you and I will pay a visit to the shanty of Santa Fe Syd, and while you take care of him in an effectual way, I will take care of his fortune, and slide out. To-morrow morning, perhaps, I will dispatch Mrs. Hathaway to Camp Stambaugh, and on the following morning, I'll send her by the stage, a sachel, containing the swag. I will remain a few days, to avert suspicion, and then will join her, first having paid you your hundred. See?"

"You bet! I ain't blind," Black Eph replied. "How do ye want Santa Fe Syd sent off—by lead or steel?"

"Steel is the safest," the colonel replied, significantly. "That will do for the present. You can go, now, and come around to-morrow night about this time, ready for business."

Dark shadows hovered about the Hathaway shanty: from out of them the form of Santa Fe Syd glided a few minutes after the termination of Black Eph's interview with the colonel.

If he had overheard the import of the interview, he did not betray it in his appearance.

Standing upon the steps, he listened, and heard Colonel Hathaway leave the kitchen and enter the sitting-room. He then softly opened the door and entered the kitchen, which was wrapt in deep gloom. This did not matter to him, however, for he thoroughly knew the house.

Removing his boots, he crept cautiously from the kitchen into the hall, and up the stairs to the floor above.

Here he paused and listened.

Voices came from the room below which told him that Colonel Hathaway had joined the late general's wife in the sitting-room; whereat a grim smile came across the miner's face.

"So far, so good," he muttered. "It was a lucky omen that caused me to play eavesdropper, and overhear Mrs. Hathaway make the remark that May was locked in her room. They say love laughs at locksmiths, and although I am not in love, I shall nevertheless laugh at the locksmith."

Creeping along the hall, he soon came to the door of the room in which he believed May to be confined, and rapped softly on the door.

Instantly there was a stir within, and a voice demanded:

"Who is there?"

"'Sh!" the mine-owner cautioned. "It is me—S. S."

"Solid Sam?" the voice interrogated, in evident surprise.

"No—Santa Fe Syd. "'Sh! don't make a noise, and I will try and get you out of this."

A bunch of keys had the miner in his possession, but none out of the lot fitted the lock. The next best thing was to remove the lock itself, which was fastened on the door outside. This was soon accomplished by aid of the miner's strong sheath-knife, and the door swung open, revealing May Miner standing inside, all ready cloaked and hatted for the street.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, in a low tone as she put her hand frankly into his. "I have been suffering many apprehensions that they would offer me some harm."

"They'll not get the chance, now," Santa Fe Syd assured, "for I shall take your guardianship upon myself. Come! let us get out of here as quickly and quietly as possible."

Solid Sam's rap on the door, was answered by an oath, without.

"Well?" a voice demanded, interrogatively—

"What's wanted?"

"I want to know why this building is sur—

rounded?" the Boy Road-Agent demanded.

"Seems to me you're crowdin' things a little."

"Waal, we opine not," the voice responded.

"Ef you're Solid Sam w'at's speakin', an' I reckon ye aire, we've got ye cornered, now, where thar ain't no hope fer ye. Thar's only two ways ter ther caso—one's thet ye've got ter cum out and surrender yerself—t'other thet ye've either got ter surrender yerself, or stay cooped up in thar, until you're so lean ye ken't make 'er respecterble shadder."

"Which I allow I sha'n't do," Solid Sam asserted. "When I am cornered square, and don't see no opening, I am one of the most manageable persons in the whole world, and don't you forget it. Now, in case I surrender, what's ter be done with my anatomy?"

There was a low murmur of voices for a few minutes; then the first speaker replied:

"Ther best ye can expect is a good clean rope, and a stout limb," was his comforting assurance.

"Bu', don't you intend to give a fellow a little breathin' spell—a short reprieve, during which he can say his prayers, and make new resolutions for the future?" Solid Sam demanded. "If not, a surrender would have no advantages."

"See hyar! aire ye chaffin'?" savagely; "fer ef ye aire et won't do you no good."

"No; honest Injun, I ain't giving you a rack-et. If I can have from now till day after tomorrow, 'thout bein' lynched, I'll surrender. If not, I won't. That's the long and short of that matter."

There was a protracted silence.

Evidently those who surrounded the post-office were holding a consultation.

"I guess they're deliberatin'," the Boy Road-Agent said, approaching Nobby Nell. "If I can get a reprieve of about forty hours or less, it will give the Branded Brows a chance to ring in a deal."

"But are you not afraid they'll promise you, till they get you in their power, and then go back on their word?" the young postmistress breathed, through her gag.

"I hardly believe they'll do that; anyhow, I'll run the risk. Ah! here comes the answer," as a rap thundered upon the door.

"Hello, there!" came from the outside.

"Well, hello yourself," Solid Sam returned.

"If you've got anything to say, say it."

"Waal, open ther door an' surrender. We've tuk a vote on et, an' ye kin hev till Thursday, at sunrise, in ther jail, afore ye're boosted. What do ye say now?"

Solid Sam took out his watch and gazed at it, meditatively. It lacked fifteen minutes of being Wednesday. He would have a little over twenty-four hours' chance for escape, if he surrendered.

That, he argued, wou'd be a sufficiently long period of time, providing the carrier-pigeon safely reached the stronghold.

"Is this all a square deal, now?" he demanded.

"If I give myself up, can I depend upon what you have said?"

"On course," was the reply. "Mebbe you ain't luv'd enny too much, but we'll keep up our side o' ther trace, all right."

"Correct. I'll take you at your word," Solid Sam declared. "If you go back on it, the crime will be on your own heads. I will surrender on the conditions proposed."

And unbarring the door, he threw it open, and stepped out into the night.

Instantly he was surrounded by a scowling crowd of town-people, and his arms made fast behind his back.

Not a few curses were leveled at him, and the aspect of affairs seemed to threaten that he would be strung up without regard to the promised reprieve, but such did not prove to be the case, for he was marched along to a strong cabin near the northern outskirts of the town, which had been especially constructed to serve the purpose of a jail.

Into this he was thrust, and the door locked after him, while a guard was placed outside.

The crowd then dispersed.

Excitement reigned supreme, in Placer City, and the night was suddenly filled with cries of triumph.

The news that the hitherto invincible young outlaw, Solid Sam, was captured and in custody, naturally created a big noise in the little mining-camp, and men, women, and children crawled out of their nocturnal abiding-places, to have a talk over the event.

Santa Fe Syd and May Miner had just arrived at the former's shanty, when the crowd came along that was marching Solid Sam to the town jail, which boasted of the somewhat suggestive name of the "Tomb."

They had just arrived from their flight from the Hathaway shanty, and paused in the doorway, to gaze upon the crowd that surged by.

"Ah! they've captured Solid Sam, at last," Atherton said, as he saw the Boy Road-Agent being hurried along. "I wonder if they're going to string him up, at once? I hopenot, for I cannot see that he is so much to blame for his wild career. The people are in reality usurping his rights."

Lawyer Green stepped up, at this juncture, from among the crowd.

"They've got the true heir to the Hathaway millions, at last," he said. "They caught him up at the post-office, and the aspect looks dark for him."

"Going to lynch him?"

"Yes. Not now, however. He's got a short reprieve."

"I'm sorry for him," Atherton said. "But it may be lucky for the town, that they've been able to nab him, before his threatened destruction of this place."

Green shook his head.

"It is my firm belief that his capture will only hasten the promised event," he replied. "The Branded Brows will soon hear of his capture, and we may expect lively developments. It seems strange, too, that he should be the late general's only son, and rightful heir."

"Yes; but is there any conclusive proof that he is such?" Santa Fe Syd queried.

"Oh! yes—plenty of it. The general himself told me the whole strange story. It seems that he, the general, becoming dissatisfied with life, with his first wife, left her up at a village along the Yellowstone, and came on into the ir

terior. In the spring, twelve years ago, he hired two roughs called Black Eph and Boston Bill, to go up to the village on the Yellowstone, and put his wife and children out of the way. They followed his instructions by capturing the mother and her two six-year-old twin children, a little boy and girl, and placed them, afloat, upon the raging river, on a frail raft, the mother bound hand and foot, so that she was helpless, and the children in turn bound to her.

"It was the calculation of the ruffians that they would all be washed or spilled from the raft and drowned, but in this they would have been doomed to disappointment, had they taken pains to follow the raft, for it was tossed high upon a projecting bar in the river, and neither the mother or her little boy was drowned. What became of the little girl is not known. The mother and her boy were later found by old White Beard, the hermit, who it turned out was the father of General Hathaway's discarded wife.

"Mrs. Hathaway was too much injured to live, and died shortly afterward, but not until she had placed her boy in White Beard's charge, and made known to him her pitiful story. White Beard took Sam—which was the boy's name—and he was reared in a hermit's home, until the latter was killed by the stampede, in this canyon, six years ago, since when young Hathaway and his grandmother have lived together somewhere in the surrounding mountains."

"But was nothing learned in regard to what became of the little girl?" Santa Fe Syd asked, with sudden eagerness.

"No, not so far as the general knew. I saw the old Witch to-day, lurking near the town, and 'collared' her, on the subject. She corroborated the late general's story, with the additional charge that he was one of the greatest villains at heart that ever lived. I asked her in regard to whatever became of Solid Sam's sister, and she did not appear to know. She stated that when White Beard found the waifs of the wreck, there were only Mrs. Hathaway and her boy, lying upon the shore, in an apparently lifeless state. Near by, however, were bonds that it seemed had once bound them, but had been severed by a sharp blade. Horses' tracks also led from the spot, and White Beard had surmised that some horseman had previously crossed the river at this point, and finding the little girl alive, and the other two apparently dead, had mercifully taken charge of the female child, and proceeded on his journey. Wild Meg says they made every effort to trace the party, but all to no avail. The man had as surely disappeared with Solid Sam's sister, as though the earth had opened up and swallowed him."

"And from your story, I am, no doubt, the identical man," Santa Fe Syd said, with a meaning smile. "Twelve years ago, in the spring-time, I found this same shipwrecked party, upon the Yellowstone shore. The woman and the boy were, to all appearance dead, and as the little girl was still alive, I took her in charge, and continued on my southward journey, never dreaming that any romance would come out of the case."

"Then—oh! Mr. Atherton, am I the waif you found?" May Miner gasped, excitedly.

"Yes, you are the same," Santa Fe Syd replied; "moreover, according to Mr. Green, you are the daughter of the late General Hathaway, and are Solid Sam's sister!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF PLACER CITY—CONCLUSION.

"CAN all this be true?" Lawyer Green exclaimed. "Well, well. It is altogether a most romantic romance in real life. So it turns out that if you come into possession of the Hathaway wealth, Miss May, you will only be getting what is rightfully your own."

"Oh! sir, I do not care so much about the inheritance as I do that the mystery of my past life is cleared up. So that young man we just saw marched past is my brother?"

"He is," Santa Fe Syd assured. "But he, of course, knows not that his sister is so near to him. Lawyer Green, if you can get an opportunity, I would like you to make this new discovery known to him; and, also, you may assure him that I will look to his rights, and his sister's. The Hathaway wealth is all in my possession, and I have made up my mind that no one shall ever finger it ahead of the legitimate heirs of my late partner."

"Very well. I will try and get the message to him," the lawyer replied, as he bade them adieu, and hurried on down the street, while Santa Fe Syd and his ward entered the miner's shanty.

At the same time a strange figure stole from the shadows near the door, and dodged away among the crowd.

The attire of this party was that of a man, but in the ugly repulsive features it was not hard to discover the identity of Wild Meg, the Witch, although there were probably none among the surging crowd in the gulch street who noticed the fact.

She had evidently been an eavesdropper to the conversation between Santa Fe Syd and the lawyer, and there was a peculiarly unreadable expression upon her face as she hurried away.

A noisy night it was in the town of Placer City; nevertheless it quieted down to some extent before morning.

Shortly after the departure of Green, Santa Fe Syd conducted May Hathaway to the hotel, which nearly adjoined his shanty, and left her in the care of the hostess for the night, while he returned to his own abode and "turned in."

It was, he judged, well on toward morning, when he was aroused to the conscious fact that he was bound hand and foot, securely gagged, and in the power of two men, who were bending over him.

Who they were he could only infer by the black, scar-like bands across the lower portions of their foreheads, and their eyes. Being unable to speak, he could only look daggers at them and wonder what was their purpose.

After carefully inspecting the bonds, evidently to see that they were secure, the two night-hawks laughed, and taking the miner by the head and heels, bore him from the shanty into the little canyon street. Here they were joined

by two other Branded Brows, who bore between them no less a person than May Hathaway, also securely bound!

The street was at this hour deserted; the saloons had closed their doors; no longer the cracked music and sounds of drunken revelry came from the neighboring dance-houses. In fact, the camp was wrapped in repose, which accounted for the boldness of Solid Sam's agents.

Two horsemen now rode out from the shadow of a building, and were handed the two prisoners before them in the saddle.

Then, with the utmost caution, they guided their horses down the street and out of the limits of the golden camp.

When morning once more dawned upon the little city, the former posters of Solid Sam were replaced with fresh ones, which read as follows:

"LAST CALL!

"THOSE citizens of Placer City who are wealthy and influential, having made no move toward paying for the rights they are usurping, I hereby warn them that unless Solid Sam is set free, by noon to-day, and the money demanded previously, is paid over to him, the town of Placer City might better have never existed; and I warn those who desire to escape without injury, to take their everlasting leave of this place at once, if the prisoner and money are not forthcoming, by the above stated hour.

"This is fair and final, and should be heeded.

"LIEUTENANT BREEZE.

"Acting-commander Branded Brows."

No matter what had been the previous excitement, in the mining-camp of Buckskin Gulch, this capped the climax.

Business was quite suspended, and throughout the day the street presented a crowded, excited aspect.

At times it looked as if mob-law would prevail, and the speedy lynching of Solid Sam seemed inevitable; but the influence of a few sturdy miners as peacemakers, prevented any open rupture.

All day long a restless set of humanity surged in the street, and sentinels were posted at every approach to the town, by those capitalists and speculators who would not pay the money demanded by the Boy Road-Agent, to prevent any of the Branded Brows from gaining access to the town.

The discovery was made during the day that several miners and their families had taken leave, and this fact only served to add to the fears of those remaining, that the proposed vengeance of the Branded Brows would come, as promised.

Noon arrived and passed, but Solid Sam was not set at liberty, nor paid the money.

That fact sealed the fate of Placer City, as a mining town.

About dusk Colonel Hathaway left the street, where he had been promenading, the most of the day, and entered the shanty that had had formerly been the abode of his brother.

In the kitchen he found Black Eph and Mrs. Hathaway, evidently waiting for him.

The latter was arrayed in male attire as well as the former and both were armed to the teeth.

"Everything is ready, and success promises to greet us," the colonel announced.

"Santa Fe Syd and the girl are missing, and unless they took the gold with them, which is not likely, it is ours. Eph, you may accompany us, until we get safely out of the gulch, for there may be trouble, yet."

They left the shanty, and hurried rapidly to that of Atherton. The door was unlocked, and they had no difficulty in effecting an entrance.

In ten minutes they emerged again onto the street, the colonel armed with two hand sachels, which were crammed full of something bulky and heavy.

As they left the shanty, there was a mighty thundering roar that made the very earth tremble—a vivid flash that illumined the sky, and the air seemed full of sparks, and particles of burning things.

"By Heaven, Myers's supply store has blown up!" a miner cried, rushing by.

A pandemonium of yells followed the report, and the vast crowds surged eagerly toward the scene of the disaster, leaving the other parts of the town fairly deserted.

"The Branded Brows have begun operations, evidently," the colonel had to confess.

"And now is our time to bid good-by. Heir by craft is fully as good as heir by law, and having the Hathaway and some of the Atherton wealth in our possession, we need not complain. Come. We will find saddle-horses waiting just beyond the town."

"Yes, an' et 'll be healthy ter get out o' ther place as soon as we can," Black Eph added, with an oath. "Look, will ye. The Branded Brows are keeping their promise!"

He pointed, as he spoke, in the several directions of the compass.

The blowing up of the supply-store, evidently, had been but a signal of what was to follow. Here, there, yonder—everywhere, sheets of lurid flame began to creep up in the night, all over the village, from the sides of shanties that incendiary hands had fired. A circle of fire surrounded the doomed town, seemingly in a single instant, and the lurid reflection upon the sky grew brighter and brighter each minute.

"Come!" Colonel Hathaway cried; "there is no time to be lost. Let's escape while there is a chance."

And with fear-blanching faces, they hurried away toward the northern part of the camp, falling in with the yelling, frightened mass of women and children that were also endeavoring to escape beyond the fiery limits of their former abodes.

A pandemonium of yells and curses rung upon the night.

Every person seemed only intent on saving as many of their personal effects as possible, for it needed no second glance to tell that the town was doomed by the destroying element. A fierce breeze was blowing through the canyon, and it was not in the power of mortal hand to check the conflagration. In five minutes after the blowing up of the supply store, there did not seem to be a building in the town except it was wrapt in flame.

Nor were any of the Branded Brows caught in the act of setting fire to the shanties, so

stealthily did they plan and execute their work.

Nor in the panic of the fire did any one seem to think of the imprisoned Boy Road-Agent, Solid Sam, except one person, and she the pretty postmistress, Nobby Nell.

As soon as Myers's Supply had blown up, she left the post-office, and hurried in the direction of the cabin-jail as fast as her feet could carry her.

A brawny guard stood before the door as she ran up; an expression of impatience upon his face, which declared his desire to be at the fire.

"For Heaven's sake, go help to put out the fire!" Nobby Nell cried, as she ran up. "The Branded Brows are trying to destroy the town, and unless prompt measures are taken they'll succeed. Go! you can help better than I. I'll take your place here!"

A nod from the miner expressed how agreeable this was to him, and the next minute he had surrendered the keys to Nobby Nell, and hurried away.

To unlock the door and liberate Solid Sam was but the work of a few seconds, on the part of the young girl; then the young road agent grasped her hand warmly.

"I thank you," he said. "You were very thoughtful of me."

Then he went to the door and gazed out into the night.

"The town is doomed!" he muttered, his eyes flashing, "and its own supporters are to blame. Before morning it will be in ashes!"

And he was right.

When day came again, where once had stood the mining-camp of Placer City, was now but a series of heaps of smoking ashes and charred embers; to tell of the vengeance of Solid Sam.

While, toiling through the gulch, away from the desolate scene, a caravan of vehicles and horses bore those who had peopled the camp in Buckskin Gulch.

Later, a rude wooden cross might have been seen upon the ashen site, on which was inscribed the words—

"Trespassers beware!"

Later, there was a reunion in the cave of the Branded Brows, between Solid Sam, and May Hathaway, his long-lost sister, whom, with Sydney Atherton, the instrumentality of old Wild Meg had caused to be removed from Placer City, previous to the conflagration. Unnecessary to state the meeting was a joyful one.

And when Santa Fe Syd made the announcement of his fears that all his own and the Hathaway fortune had gone with his cabin in the fire, Solid Sam shook his head.

"No, not so bad as that. It is, however, in the possession of Colonel Hathaway and the late general's wife, who are wandering somewhere in the fastnesses of the mountains. They stole it from your cabin where I was confined, they told me this, and mocked at me. Unfortunately I did not gain my liberty in time to overtake them, but Lieutenant Breeze and a dozen of the boys are after them and their capture is only a matter of time."

And so it proved.

The fugitives were overhauled, a few days later by Lieutenant Breeze and his men, and the stolen fortune retaken.

At the same time two horsemen rode up who proved to be Romeo Bill Shakespeare and his bouncing Juliet.

"Colonel Hathaway," the poet observed, quietly, "allow me to introduce you to Messrs. Peterson and Pratt, detectives, from Chicago, where you and your female companion, here, are wanted upon the charge of forgery and bank robbery. After having so extended a tour for your health, I dare say you will be ready to go back with us. Have you any objections to parting with the precious pair, Sir Road-Agent?"

"None whatever," Breeze replied, as he and his men rode away with the treasure, leaving the unfortunates in the charge of the clever pair of tracers.

Down in Buckskin Canyon no second city rose, phoenix-like, upon the site of the former mining-camp, for shortly after the fire, Leadville's fame became heralded to the world, and proved a magnet for the mining-class. Yet a couple of cabins there are in the gulch, and in one of them Santa Fe Syd and she that was May Hathaway live happily as man and wife. The other cabin is tenanted by Wild Meg; for to her and his sister, jointly, Solid Sam gave over all his interest in the mines, and in the Hathaway fortune previous to his disbanding of the Branded Brows and departure to other parts of the golden West, where a love for excitement led him as by a powerful hand.

Nobby Nell also left for parts unknown, although it was surmised by the Athertons that she would eventually bring up wherever did the strange youth—for whom she seemed to cherish more than a girlish fancy—Solid Sam.

THE END.

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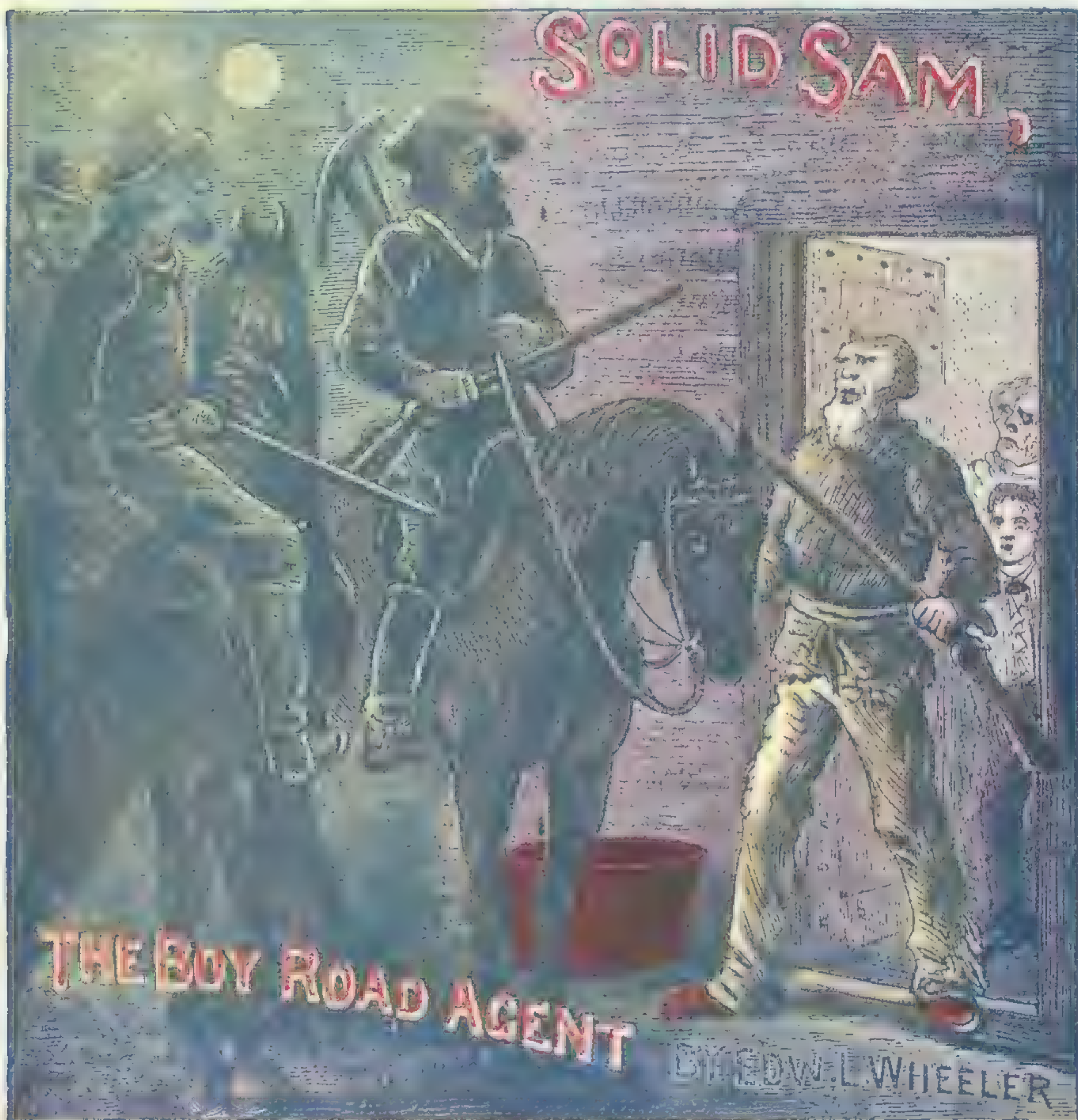


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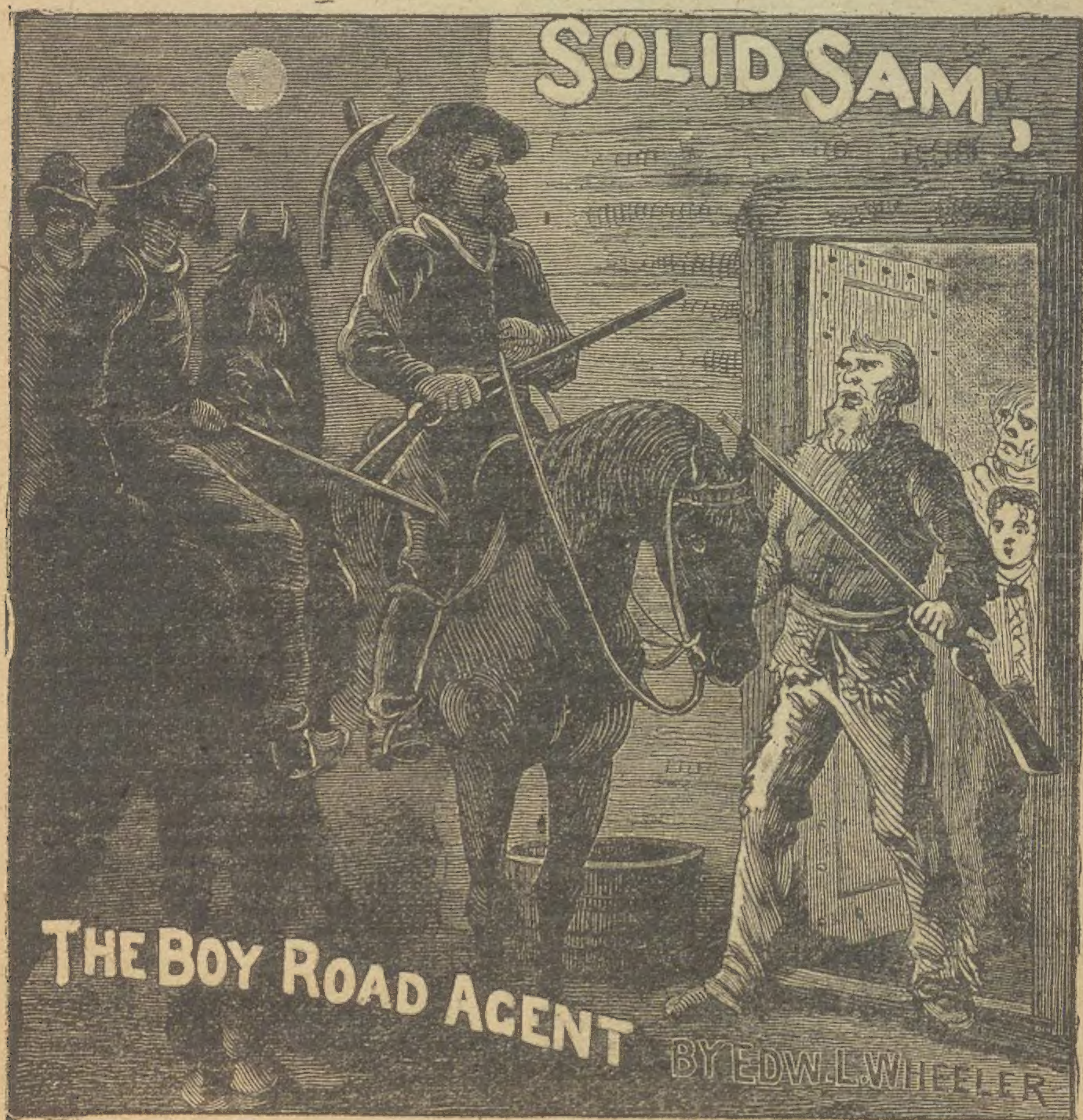


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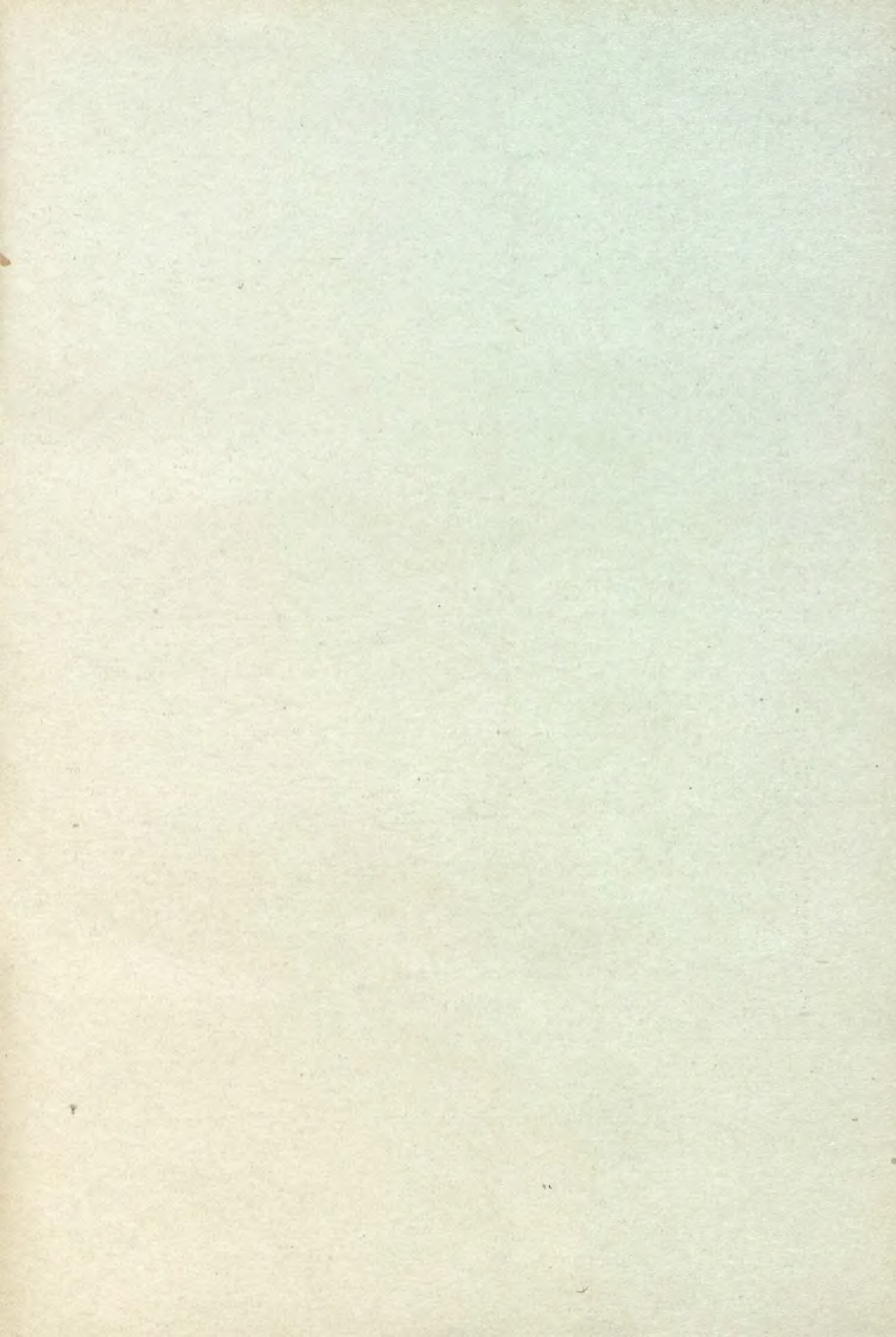
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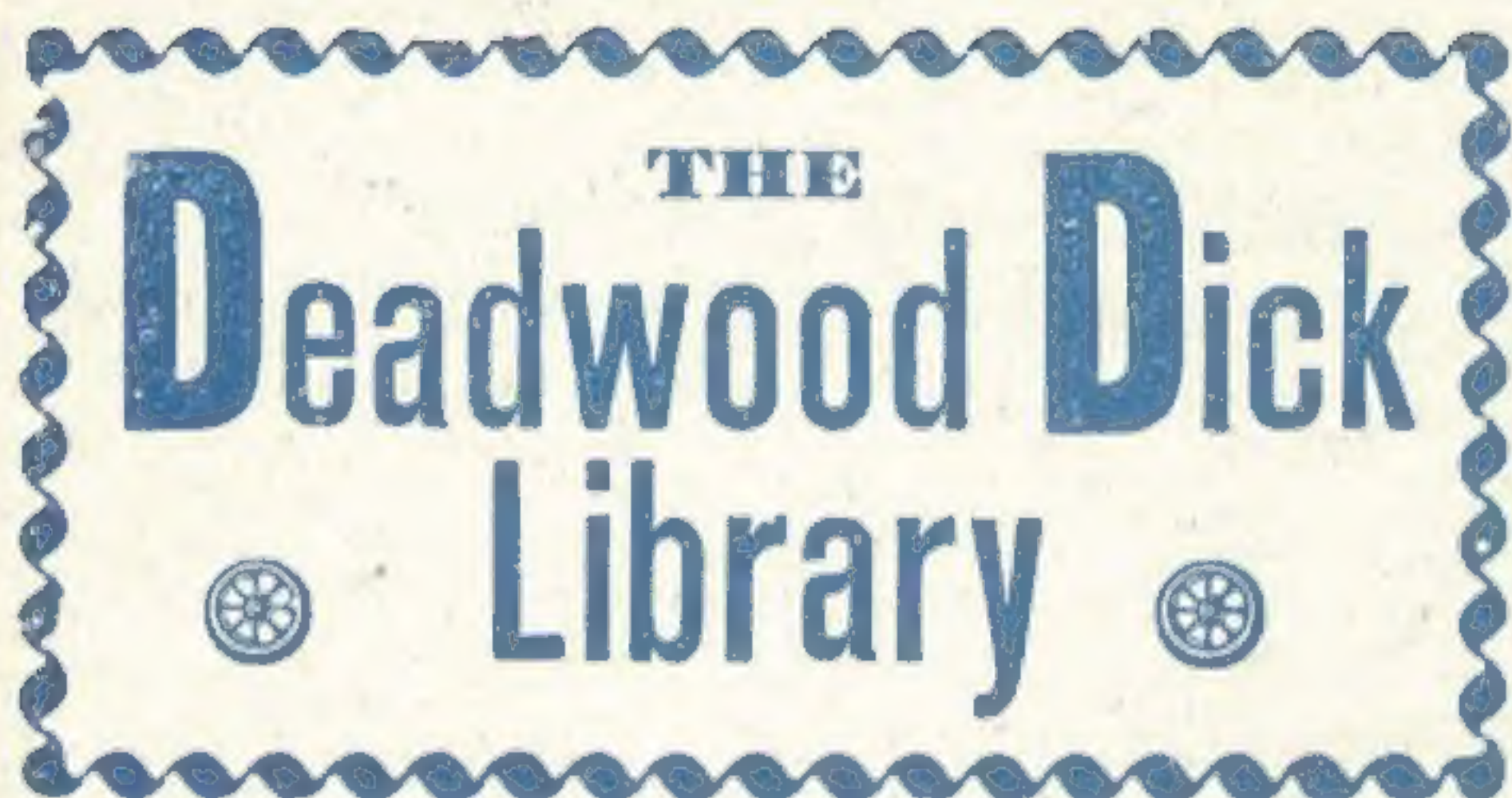
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